The Gesture of Listening to Music

Dr. Challand.

You have asked me to keep a record of my thoughts, as a supplement to our discussions. Given how little diversion my life currently provides, I will indulge you — and myself — even though I cannot claim to be an engaging writer; nor even an attentive witness to my own mental states. No matter how banal or outlandish the content, I hope you see this exercise as a gesture of faith in your expertise, given that I would not agree to such an intimate form of communication with most of the other professionals to whom I have turned to in the past. And so I sit here in my study, the windows open on one of those early spring days in which hope promises (or should that be threatens?) to return, like a lover from one’s banished youth; limping and faintly ridiculous, but welcome company nevertheless. I have a pot of tea brewing beside me, but just noticed that the cup I selected is chipped. Why mention such an insignificant detail? Because in doing so I might better ignore the fact that a starling is chirping in the birch tree in the garden.

The problem, as you know, has been distilled by you and your colleagues into a triple diagnosis. Monomania. Melancholia. Melophobia. (Three intimidating M’s.) The first describes my
fixation. The second my inclination. And the third, my affliction. I am single-minded in my sorrow, and sorrowful in my single-mindedness. We both know this. And yet it provides some sense of perspective to write it down in black-and-white (no doubt the reason you asked me to do so). I get to see myself through the professional gaze; along with the confident and clearly shaped technical terms that attempt to seize and explain the pitiful nature of my condition.

The most difficult lesson, perhaps, is the one in which we learn that the universe is entangled, beyond all human capacity to understand these clandestine connections. Meaning that if a hapless soul, such as myself, tries to avoid one thing, she ends up avoiding almost everything. For not only does one thing lead to another, but each thing is inextricably bound to another, even as the self attempts to detach from all of life's grasping tentacles. (You see the irony here, as well as I, I'm sure.) In trying to avoid music—a folly I've been earnestly attempting for over ten years now—I must also elude all manner of things sympathetically attached to music. For someone like myself, with skin made of pure nerves, it is as if everything in life is connected by invisible string, and if one object is tugged and toppled, in order to be relieved of its presence, a swift chain reaction leaves everything scattered on the ground. (I fear I'm already expressing myself badly.) So to say, invisible spider webs—spun from the human sense of impending dread—are woven around our ankles and hearts, tripping us up when we step too far, or venture forth with too much plan and purpose. Who knew that a profound, visceral fear of music would lead, for instance, to an associated fear of mirrors, for the simple reason that I cannot bear to see what this original distress has done to my once fairly pleasant face? Music—which I once adored above all the other intangible pleasures of life—has etched its bitter score into my skin, and across my persecuted features. (I know this to be true! No sadist with a quill could have done a better job at carving lines in my forehead than my own tortured thoughts. (But I have made
progress, Dr. Challand, since I write the word “music” now with only a shudder, rather than a dry panic!)

Yes. Progress. For here I am, scratching words upon a blank page, and my heart is merely skipping, rather than trying to escape the cage of my ribs. Something about this morning, and perhaps even this starling’s song, is inspiring a fruitful kind of fatigue in me. (Another victory, Dr. Challand — as I just wrote the word “song” while sipping tea, without spilling a drop!) I no longer feel like twisting and turning away from myself, or the people I pay to put up with me. There is something soothing about the act of writing; in its silence, in its honest distance from music. Writing is frank, even when it tries to convince, persuade, or mislead. One can see it — one can take its measure, by the eye and with reason. (Poetry, of course, attempts to smuggle the spirit of music into the body of the text, to varying degrees of success, which is why I avoid the masters of cadence and prosody.) The clean and crisp letters of the alphabet provide strong structures for mutual comprehension; like the frame of a house, or the bones of our bodies. Music, on the other hand, is invisible. It refuses to be arrested, even when captured by a gramophone recording. The obscene orchid-shaped trumpet ejaculates sound, when the needle touches the disc, but we cannot catch this vibrational bile in a bucket, for further investigation; should we even want to. Music is the most duplicitous of aesthetic seductions, and it is no coincidence that the Sirens used song to lure men to their death. (I often have nightmares where I am, like Ulysses, strapped to the prow of a ship, and unable to stop the music entering my ears, my mind, my soul.)

Did all this begin with the father, as your science insists? Or the mother? I am sorry to disappoint you on this score, but my own trauma did not occur until I was a young woman. (Unless we consider the possibility that the seeds of this ordeal were planted as an infant, eventually leading me to be attracted to the kind of person who…. who…well…isn’t this the crux of it? The talking cure — or in this moment, the attempted writing cure — always breaks down at the moment of most significance. It is impossible to confront the monster face to face, without
being destroyed by it; or at least damaged further. But this is precisely what I intend to do, fortified as I am by Earl Grey, and an unseen bird that is mercifully avoiding devolving into melody.)

Perhaps I should stop here. Perhaps I have had enough “excitement” for one day. But no. I believe I am finally ready to tell a lurid tale: The Story of the Man Who Made Me This Way. The True and Authentic Account of He Who Ruined Me. (Or if not this, I at least feel ready to acknowledge that there is a definite tale to be told here.) The curtain rises to reveal a gay young woman; no better or worse than any other of this time and tribe. Thinking back, I am fond of this young woman, and wish to warn her of what she would become. For I had days of compassion, just as I had days of self-absorption. I occasionally sinned, even as I prevented others from sinning, when their eyes asked me to do so. When I met the man who carried my fate in his pockets, I thought I had already known love several times. In fact, I had only been brushed by its indifferent wing. In this case, however, I was to be devoured by its jagged beak. He was charming. A composer from one of those small, hilly European towns that produce more than their fair share of personified genius. We met at a concert hall where he was being celebrated for his second symphony, which was taking London by storm. I fell for his voice first, I believe, which was deep and resonant, like a cello, tense with resin. His eyes were restless: pleading and insolent all at once. Of course, I was powerless against a master of this, the most fundamental art of the muses. Over champagne and baked trout he explained to me his childhood epiphany: that he could in fact hear the music of the spheres, and channel it through human instruments. He explained to me that life is bathed in music, and even silence is a suspended form of harmony. During his sojourn in London, and as he openly courted me, his techniques became increasingly experimental. Soon enough, he was looking for music in places even the most bold and modern critics would find unmusical. He returned from a trip to Italy in an especially feverish mood, obsessed by a group of forward-thinking artists bonded through contempt for tradition, and who called the concert hall “a hospital for anemic
sounds.” Speaking of blood, I remember one occasion when I accidentally cut myself on the head of a nail, sticking out from a door frame. As soon as he noticed, he grabbed my hand with relish and sucked the blood off my finger. Closing his eyes, in an obscene sensual transport, he suddenly claimed to hear the melody that had hitherto been trapped in my veins. He then spent half the night transcribing it for harpsichord, viola, shrill soprano, and stockman’s whip. (I fainted three bars into the piece, the first time I heard it “played” at a salon.)

However, when not deliberately assaulting the ears of innocent music lovers, he could make the most enchanting and exquisite compositions come to life on an intimate scale, as if drawing a mural for me in mid-air, with his own delicate and phosphorescent fingers. When in a tender mood, as would happen sometimes when we were alone, he would play the piano for me in a way that felt like he was caressing and massaging my tired limbs. When he played the violin, I felt as if it were my own hair stretched across the wooden bridge, producing shivers of pleasure down my neck. And when he played the flute, it was if he was breathing music over my entire being; as if my body had become an Aeolian harp, leaving my very soul with ticklish and prickling flesh. Had he been content to dwell in such moods, I would continue to welcome the moving power of music whenever I encountered it. Instead, I fled even the very possibility of its occurrence. If an organ grinder set up shop outside my window, I would have to impose on my weary sister’s hospitality until I heard word that he had moved on. If a child began to whistle, I would glare at this simple urchin until their lips grimaced in confusion, thereby breaking the sound in two. So to say, when I finally managed to escape the spell of this man’s suffocating presence, I soon realized that I would possibly be spending the rest of my days escaping any kind of sound which threatened to coalesce into an order or pattern. Trains were no longer a viable form of transport for me, given the rhythm of their movement. The chirping of birds drove me to distraction. And the morning song of shopgirls, on their way to work, would
prompt me to take off my shoe as a missile (although I never let one fly).

For you see, when I regretfully refused his hand in marriage, for reasons too complicated to go into here, his compositions became increasingly obsessive, elaborate, and vengeful. While I attempted to remain a firm friend, perhaps even an illicit lover, he became sullen and sarcastic. I heard unpleasant rumors about underground concerts, in which startled young women would, only minutes into the performance, suddenly find themselves with bleeding noses, rushing from their seats in white dresses stained red. Even so, I agreed to be his “private ear,” for new compositions, in the interest of salvaging our already tattered relationship.

This…this was the definitive period when he resorted to actual torture, through the instruments of his trade. (Who knew they could be so cruel?) Even in an auditorium, packed to the gills with polite society, he figured out a way to isolate me in the crowd, and beam the full power of his craft into a vindictive point, needling the ear and wheedling the mind. (I imagine this is where you take notes, Dr. Challand, concerning a delusional egoistic tendency. But I swear to you this is true. I don’t claim to be special. But I am convinced that he had the power to pummel me into spiritual submission through his diabolical arrangements.) For you see, he spoke often of his impatience for any philosophy or system which separated the body from the soul. They were one and the same, in his eyes (and ears). And music was the proof. This approach to his musical works meant that he became a kind of unhinged surgeon, wielding a sonic scalpel with sadistic precision.

He took laudanum in increasing doses at this time, and spoke incoherently about Orpheus and Pythagoras, and the principle of pathos. I tried to make sense of his feverish lectures, as he would announce things grandly (or even worse, in a hissing whisper). Things like: “I will make the listeners’ salivary glands vibrate in such a way as to think and feel the geometric structure of the fugue and so a logical aspect of the world as a whole.” Or, at another time, “I will make the listeners’ oral cavities oscil-
late in such a way they mentally experience unconditional, all-embracing love.” To all appearances he succeeded in the latter, given that he swiftly gained an entourage of simpering girls and boys (as well as unsettling hybrids of both). Indeed, I have no doubt he succeeded in his devilish pact or pursuit, given that his concerts continued to persecute me in particular; making my teeth vibrate as if at the dentist, or my eyes water as if filled with smoke, or my stomach churn, as if pregnant with an incubus. During one particularly manic sonata, I confess with great shame, he even managed to bring me to an urgent physical climax, twenty rows away from the stage!…only to leave me cold, abandoned, and humiliated in the third movement. It was an act of pure spite. But there was no denying its force. Indeed, his power was such that I began to fear even the most innocuous melody, the most harmless and capricious ditty, in case it smuggled slivers of his malicious intent. I began to sense a bottomless well of dread lurking behind every attempt to beguile the ear; every instance of solicitous vibration. The gesture of music was as a consequence no longer a glorious thing. No longer a mode of reception, where the molecules of divine sound traced and affirmed the contours of the self in glowing, resonant affirmation. Instead it was a violation. An enforced opening. Exposure to a black ocean. Dissolution. My entire sense of self was like those metal plates covered in sawdust, across which a bow is drawn, making the particles dance into a cosmic shape latent in the vibrations themselves. Only in reverse. The clarity of my soul’s silhouette was being drawn into blank anonymity.

And all this came to the point where…well…you know the rest, don’t you, Dr. Challand. I’m sure I’ve already tested your patience with this rather breathless narrative. But I hope you see it for what it is: a good faith attempt at self-cure, with your calm support as inspiration. I dare say there is catharsis between these lines!

Indeed—yes, why not?—during my next appointment I urge you to enter the room humming! I do believe I could stand this, with only some modest gritting of teeth (provided the morning is as splendid as this one, with hope riding the sun
beams like miniature foals). Not long ago, as you well know, I could not abide anyone taken with the act of humming. These people, humming a few bars of the latest popular song, as they measured out a half-pound of Turkish delights, or as they tapped their pencil on the *Times*’s crossword puzzle on the bus meant no harm, but they may as well have been agents of the devil to my former self. (You see what I just did there? I just placed some rational distance between my current self, and the woman who writhed with affliction. So I see: writing has its own kind of magic. It can chase away the shadows.)

Yes, Dr. Challand. I believe that I am improving. After all, just this morning I saw a photograph of a violin in a magazine, and did not even cover my ears.