

Lars Gustafsson

THE STILLNESS OF THE WORLD BEFORE BACH

There must have been a world before
the Trio Sonata in D, a world before the A minor Partita,
but what kind of a world?

A Europe of vast empty spaces, unresounding,
everywhere unawakened instruments
where the *Musical Offering*, the *Well-tempered Clavier*
never passed across the keys.

Isolated churches

where the soprano line of the *Passion*
never in helpless love twined round
the gentler movements of the flute,
broad soft landscapes

where nothing breaks the stillness
but old woodcutters' axes,

the healthy barking of strong dogs in winter
and, like a bell, skates biting into fresh ice;
the swallows whirring through summer air,
the shell resounding at the child's ear
and nowhere Bach nowhere Bach
the world in a skater's stillness before Bach.

(Translated by Philip Martin)

W. H. Auden

THE COMPOSER

All the others translate: the painter sketches
A visible world to love or reject;
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches
The images out that hurt and connect.

From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,
Relying on us to cover the rift;
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift.

Pour out your presence, O delight, cascading
The falls of the knee and the weirs of the spine,
Our climate of silence and doubt invading;

You alone, alone, O imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.

Elizabeth Bishop

SONNET

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling finger-tips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

Mary Stewart Hammond

SEEING MOZART'S PIANO QUARTET
IN E-FLAT MAJOR IN THE OLD
WHALING CHURCH, EDGARTOWN

They wait, five women in black,
before a wall painted such a flat, soft gray
it reads as silence, or sky.

The pianist's hands curve over the keyboard.
The page turner leans toward the pianist's score.

The violinist, the violist, the cellist
bring their bows near the strings. Fluted pilasters
rise into an arch ceiling high, framing them.

The church, classic Greek Revival
straight from the style books, and *retarditaire* at that,
is 57 years younger than the music you are about
not to hear, but with its pillars, its two
center aisles dividing the nave into three parts,
in its classicism and its purity, it is useful
for showing the architecture of the sonata.
The thing about music, it takes place in time,
and can't be seen. Nor can it be heard in a poem

A colorless, unfinished, 8 o'clock sky pauses
in triple hung windows flanking the pilasters.

Scrub oak darkens the lower panes.

The pianist nods. We know by the musicians'
movements that Mozart's allegro begins its lift
up off the pages on the music stands, but from this page
all you have is action. The music is silent
as a black and white picture show
before the arrival of sound. The pianist misses



some notes. The violist looks at the violinist,
her hair a stubble three months after chemo.
Strings shine on the black necks of the instruments.
The musicians' fingers climb up and down like spiders,
thumbs hugging the backsides of the necks.
They glide their bows, forearms rigid,
across the strings, or make them tiptoe.

The second theme's leading motif, almost lost
under the angelic, repeats and repeats
like supplications. It is one of Mozart's miracles,
this longing under joy, its flirtations with death
balanced with lyricism, but you have only words for it.
The violist and the ensemble coax the allegretto
and transubstantiation from wooden boxes. In a year
she will be dead. The music breathes
in the musicians bodies, their fingers, their wrists,
and the white grid of the windows' muntins cages the black sky.
Even where the bottom sashes open to the summer air,
the night is held back until the musicians stop,
hold their poses, waiting, four seconds, nine,
for the last notes to find home. They fling up their arms
pumped with arrival, and rise to take a bow
before the firmament of the soft gray wall,
leaving us in our humanness under the electric lights.