



Christopher Bernard

Music of the Spheres

Adrienne is young and small and what used to be called “mousy” – you’d hardly notice her if you passed her on the street. She can’t make more than twenty or thirty dollars a day. It seems a crime, because she’s good.

She sits in a lotus position, her back against a lamp post, her eyes pressed shut. She holds a guitar. Her swift, serene, ingenious fingers improvise melodies in the street’s cacophony.

At the sound of a coin dropping in her case, her eyes pop open, a smile radiates with a heartfelt “Thanks!” then she shuts her eyes again and picks up the tune where she left off.

Every so often I’ve seen a look of blank despair on her face as she rests from playing. She stares around her as if she’d just woken from another world and wondering what on earth she’s doing here. Her guitar sits in her lap, a soundless bulky wooden box. The pedestrians just see another panhandler and quicken their pace. Inspiration wanes, fingers tire, people have places to go. Adrienne gives what she can, the passersby give what they can.

I try to give Adrienne a couple of bucks whenever I pass. She stops, looks up with her blast of smile and a “Thank you!” and goes back to finish the phrase she was just in the middle of, like a bird pausing then resuming its flight. I don’t think she recognizes me.

Peter plays alto sax in a little jazz trio every Tuesday and Thursday at O’Henry’s. They get paid in dinner, of the manager’s choosing. It’s a noisy place,

and few listen or even hear. Peter says it's all he can do to hear himself, especially when there's a big party. O'Henry's specializes in big parties. Recently the manager has been grumpy toward them, and Peter wonders if they're about to get the ax. He saw him talking to Dexter Daxter, the lounge pianist at the Gold'n Spade, at the bar one Monday night when Peter stopped by to see Rain, the barmaid.

I once went to hear Peter (I can't afford to eat often at O'Henry's). Through the low roar of patrons and waiters, Peter's saxophone intermittently murmurs, sounding cheerfully beaten, in the way of jazz. The drum was like distant static, the bass a vague rumbling, more a suggestion than a sound. They played quietly, not even fighting the surrounding night-out clatter, their eyes closed as if in a deliberate withdrawal from their surroundings that offered them a chance to play with little chance of being heard.

"Live Muzak," Peter replied with a grin when asked once what he played. He wasn't bitter, he said; the look on his face in the restaurant was of rapture. He sat down at my table between sets, and, from his laugh and the sweat streaming down his face, you'd think he'd just played Carnegie Hall. But you could tell his peace came at a price.

I've been noticing the street musicians downtown more than usual. Adrienne with her guitar is in a class of her own, but there are others worth a listen: the jazz trumpeter outside Clave, the accordionist at Kearny and Pine, the violinist who wears an Indian chief's headdress and performs Bach bare-chested across from the art museum, the two portly opera singers, tenor and coloratura, belting their Verdi and Puccini hearts out at the base of Maiden Lane, even the kazoo player who sits against the fire hydrant on Market near Battery buzzing through a repertory that extends from Rossini to Ella to Jenny Lewis in day-long marathon sets.

Each of them has a hat, or an open case, in front of them, with a couple of bucks and a few coins inside, to coax some of their fellows from the pockets of passersby.

I couldn't do it. Not even if I had learned to play an instrument, which I didn't, or could stand the sound of my own voice, which I can't. I *can* listen, so I do that. I can even give a few coins, though I'm not in a position to give much. So I do that too. I do my bit, little as it is. I'm an audience. I pay attention.

They're young for the most part – twentysomethings, a few brave teens, with their lives ahead of them. A few middle-aged pros show up now and again, between gigs or new to the city: a flamenco guitarist held me in thrall for half an hour one day. I was agog – what are you doing (I almost asked him), playing *on the street*? I felt offended for him, the manifest injustice of it. I gave him my upper range of two dollars, thought better of it and added a third. There goes my afternoon coffee, I groaned in silence. True pro that he was, aloof in sideburns, leather vest, glaring white shirt, he disdainfully flashed his Spanish profile and continued turning his guitar into dances of saint and duende.

Occasionally I see entire groups: bands from the Andes, mariachis, a string trio, a black men's barbershop quartet crooning in parallel harmony, a

saxophone quartet. And there's the piano player who parks his spinet on Columbus and plays stride and ragtime every Saturday night.

There are a few old men (rarely old women, for some reason – maybe it seems too senseless to them): they play very softly, almost apologetically, with their heads lowered. There is a Chinese man who plays the er-hu near the Bank of Taiwan; his instrument looks ancient and he even more so; the sound wails softly and querulously into the bright Chinatown night, sounding fragile and distant as a forgotten dynasty. The old timers almost never look up, even when I say hello, as if they were half-ashamed. Their hats generally attract the fewest coins.

Then there are the blessed and the ecstatic: the psychos on and off their meds. There's the violinist in the subway station who grinds out, with a blissful grin, no note known to humanity, like a buzz saw, and there's the singer who sings everything on one note, just outside her range, and thus reminds God she's still waiting for him, and there's the tuba player immersed in the enormous brass doughnut of his instrument who, for a quarter, will blow the lowest note he can reach for a full minute, as he turns red and people take bets whether or not he'll faint: he doesn't, and he smiles when he finishes with a victorious gasp.

It's never enough, they all seem to agree with almost abject modesty. It's as if they pour the notes out in little bowls and then line the bowls up along the curb. Cats come from all over the city to lap them up, like milk, then sit down and look at them. No matter how much they give – and they give everything they have – it's never enough. How could it be? The most beautiful melody in the world is just a tune. It's like a mirror, which can reflect your face, lover, world, a feast, a wipe of sky – but a feast you can't eat, a world you can't live in, lips you can't kiss, a face you cannot have, a sky under which you'll never travel. Beneath our modesty, they seem to say, pride and vanity doth ride us, as in a parable by John Bunyan: if you look closely enough, in our mirror you can see the faces of the gods, mean and smiling. Though only in reflection. We can't provide the real thing. We can paint you a picture of God but we can't actually give you God.

It's this realization, I think, that hurts their eyes when they look at me.

What's the most humiliating position in an orchestra? The back stands in the second violins. I knew a violinist who played there, in a small local orchestra. A few drinks, and he'd be off on his lament: You never get a solo, nobody can see you, they can't even *hear* you – you could be sawing away at all the wrong notes, and all you might get is a dirty look from your desk partner. Even the conductor doesn't care as long as you look like you're playing in unison. And no matter how brilliantly you perform, the conductor will never point you out with a fat smile, make you stand up awkwardly to tumultuous applause from the audience and a respectful rapping of their instruments by your envious colleagues, you will never get your well and long deserved solo bow at the end of a concert. Bassoonists get more respect than you do! No one even knows you exist: not once, in the twenty-three years he'd been playing in the orchestra, had anyone approached my friend on the street and said, "I recognize you from the symphony!" "That happens all the time to that banging so-and-so, the percussionist!" he once lamented.

He's bitter and filled with self-pity – being in the last second-violin stands of a small-town "band" had not been the future he had envisaged for himself

when he was a young student. He was no Heifetz, to be sure, but he could beat Francescatti at his own game. And not even to end up in a quartet! Of course he has no prospects for promotion.

“Once a second fiddle, always a second fiddle!” he says with a laugh that sounds stuck in his throat.

He is 50, and though he claims he is sick of the classical standards, he sticks his nose up at “modern music.” And he wouldn’t be caught dead in a pop music club. (I’ve always suspected him of a secret envy for jazz: if jazz violin had caught him in his youth, he might have been seduced despite all the Beethoven in the world.)

And yet, when I watch him attacking Mahler or Brahms from my perch in the balcony, I sense his self-pity is something of a pose: the look on his face – focused, absorbed, both calm and heated – is that of an absorbed child totally immersed in his private world: he has the same rightness, for all his complaints before and after, as the flight of a bird in a swarming flock. It’s only when he is elsewhere that he seems lost, and I suspect his suffering – because he does suffer – is not from frustrated ambition or a lack of personal acclaim; it is actually because he can’t be buried playing at the heart of his orchestra all the time and not just for a few short hours a week, as a result of his union contract and the needs of body and mind for feeding, sleeping, changing position, running errands, lending support to his fellow mortals, calling his mother, for variety and change, even for boredom and fatigue and the rest of it. He thinks he is suffering because of his position in the orchestra. But actually it’s because he is *only* happy when playing at the back of the second violin section – nothing else really comes close; and when the concert is over, he must come back to earth, and the transition is so painful, he has ended by blaming the source of his happiness for the misery he feels when he leaves it.

Micmac is a local troubadour who sings while playing his ukulele – a tartly tuned masterpiece of baroque decoration - in the cafes of Berkeley and Oakland. He’s a local favorite, with his gentle hangdog look and drooping mustache, his harem pants and yellow beret, with a gang of friends and fans at every gig, many of which materialize from the impulse of the moment, a glass of fernet branca, and a ready audience. He’s well liked, and his music has the personal twang of a sweet joy and sadness somewhere between whiskey melancholy and ganja giddiness. He’s a poet too and recites his poems in a mellow chanting voice that belies the rasping of his singing.

Micmac can seem half-asleep when you first meet him, his eyes half-closed, mouth slack, his conversation a string of mumbled non sequiturs, his body half falling from his chair. But the moment you give him his ukulele, crusted over with shells and trinkets, tiny plastic figures, charms and talismans, his back stiffens, his eyes flick open, his mustache perks up as his fingers tickle the strings. And he sings about love and loss and hope and betrayal, and the political ironies of the day, with a sharpness that is a shock after his earlier ramblings.

Micmac seems alive only when he’s playing. Sometimes it seems his music doesn’t just express his life; it *is* his life. When not playing, he is, in a sense, dead. Afterward, for the moment exhausted or drained, he slumps back, slipping back in his chair, his eyelids falling like blinds, his mouth slack and

mumbling good-humored nonsense, Lazarus biding his time for the next resurrection.

A little boy once went to a hardware store to buy a nail. It needed to be so long yet so short, to have a head that was so narrow and yet so wide, it needed to be strong but inconspicuous and secure but easily removed. The boy looked everywhere in the store for a nail like that. The store clerks showed him one nail after another, but he rejected them all. This one was too short, that one was too long, this had the wrong head, and so on. So he went home, baffled and dissatisfied, and made do without the nail. The object he wanted to hang he did not hang, the thing he wanted to hammer together he did not hammer together. He sat there feeling frustrated, and while doing so, idly sketched a picture of his ideal nail on the back of a card someone had sent him. It gave him a certain melancholy satisfaction. So he drew it again, from another angle. Then again. And again.

From drawing a nail he later drew a door, then a window, then a house, then a view overlooking a town, and then he drew a city, a city that contained all the things he would have built if he had been able to find his nail.

One evening as the light was fading and he was putting the final touches on his masterpiece, a picture of a cathedral, and he was already beginning to feel the sadness that came over him whenever he finished a picture, an image of an object that did not and apparently could not exist, a strange thought struck him.

What if any nail would have done, and the litter of wood that had accumulated around him in little piles, unbuilt, awkward in the rain or covered with dust where it rotted in the corners while he had been covering pages with drawings, had been unnecessary – what if he hadn't really needed the "right nail" after all? What if he had let himself be defeated by an idea?

By this time he was an old man, and all the nails he had seen in the hardware store decades ago had long rusted away. What he had was pictures.

The guitar in Adrienne's hands – a box of wood and metal and gut – seems real enough. The strings thrum, the box sounds, the sound moves, in an expanding sphere, through the air, through the bone and skin and muscle of Adrienne's hands, along her arms, her torso and her neck, through her skull into her inner ear, stirring the auditory nerve then vanishing into the neurons of her brain stem and medulla and cerebrum and cerebellum, and there catches, then captures, her mind, psyche, heart, all of Adrienne, and all of this has occurred through some motions of her fingers on the strings of a guitar.

Sometimes – maybe even usually – it feels like doodling pointlessly on hard strings on a cold corner surrounded by strangers rushing past. But at moments she looks as though she feels suddenly whole. And the fractured, inhospitable world melts together and freezes into a singing unit and she and her universe unite at the still point of the turning world.

Just for a moment. It vibrates together, from deep in Adrienne's inner ear to the shadows and glimmerings of the people around her, who listen, for a moment caught by the sound. Those vibrating strings hold the world, and they play with it, for that weird, enchanted moment. For a moment the world's greatest possible evil is no more than a tickle that makes you laugh till you're half dead.

And to think we once were afraid of dying. How foolish can you get. Almost as foolish as being afraid of living – of pain, suffering, disappointment, humiliation, shame. . .

There is, after all, still and always *this moment* (it seems to say), however cold, bleak, dingy and unforgiving the last moment was or the next moment will be: the sounds from Adrienne's guitar, Peter's sax, the old man's er-hu, the big tuba - held in a crumpled bit of origami that unfolds, in a cup of water, into a little spray of flowers, forests, cities, worlds, galaxies, universes that fold back once again – universes, galaxies, worlds, cities, forests, flowers – into a melody drifting across a downtown traffic jam.

If there were any face that seemed to speak some kind of wisdom, it's Adrienne's when she's playing her guitar, though the knowledge, a fragile thing, may disappear the moment it's known, like a shy deer disappearing into the woods the moment it realizes it's been seen. A moment before, it doesn't exist; a moment later, it's gone, like a dream as she wakes to the street corner, to reality, which, as we all know, and none more than dreamers, punishes dreams and dreamers without mercy.

Those experiments in biology class with the heart of a frog beating in a saline solution in a little Petri dish: here is a heart outside a body, yet it's still alive. It's tender, even beautiful, once you get past the first disgust. It has scars – see that one there, and there? It's still beating. Its blood, which spits out in one huge spurt into the solution all the blood inside it, is dark, like human blood.

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Image: From Yellow Brick Road Street Outreach (Portland, Oregon) (website).