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from Perfect Pitch

Translated from Spanish by Judith Filc

LISTEN: MUSIC IS BORN from the human mind, but it also appears naturally, like the smell of malt, like the taste of celery. Humans desperately try to prevent it from slipping through their fingers. They fasten it to the score, to instruments, to commentaries, to theory books, to records . . . And yet music goes beyond all that; it lasts like nothing else lasts, and grows on its own. Music soaks it in; it's an autonomous mind. It just needs to be remembered in order to live . . . Thinking of these issues brought peace to my mind . . . In any case . . . In any case, when we say music, *music as a whole*, we're not only talking about the fabulous melody that dawned in the mind of so-and-so (just as in the mind of others, less lucky, might dawn the idea of buying a pair of pants), we're also talking about . . . well, tonal structures, right? I descried that tonal structures operate like feelings. In Bruckner's Fourth, in a quintet by Boccherini, there's a *je ne sais quoi* that grows, recedes, comes and goes, is stored, fragments into parts that clash and reconcile; there's daring, fervor, calm, spite, and appeasement, and even fog. Hah! Just like human feelings. . . Odd, eh? . . . But careful now, don't think that every musical piece says a well-known emotion, that a serenade by Mozart is an impish prank, and a Webern quintet a somber fatality. That's just a trifle, fodder for the scatter-brained . . . What's actually true is that the drive behind music, its invisible breath, is of the same stuff as the breath of feelings. *Correspondences*. . . what I believe a piece is saying . . . are a mole, a symptom, a signpost. The essential organ, I thought, is on the other side, below, in the center, nobody knows where, and it continually makes new moles, new signs appear, all entirely different. There are a zillion music pieces, suites by Debussy and motets by Palestrina, serial symphonies and contradances, and to reach the basic mold, you have to approach it from each piece, from one phrase, from one *note*, just as it's true that only from the shimmer of a drop can we approach the idea of light . . . And I would say to myself, Pay attention to that aria by Monteverdi, Lotario; rummage in it, gnaw it, dig, *eat it*. Until you're completely distracted . . . That's what I'd say to myself. . . As

distracted as when you're sitting on the edge of a pond staring at the clouds for hours, and suddenly you don't even notice that you dipped your hand in the water and bang, you've caught a trout . . . It's just a way of speaking, yes, but *that* makes sense . . . That's a personality—in the end, that full instant is me, I imagined, I said to myself. I have no grace, no birth certificate, no miraculous window, I don't know my wife or my daughter very well, I have no country. But I'm a . . . *manifestation* of something, right? Just like that aria by Monteverdi is a manifestation of something, I'd say to myself. And, I swear, the uneasiness started receding . . . Perhaps I, too, harbored a key. After all, any Tom, Dick, or Harry had to . . .”

He stopped to replenish his provision of air. That thick, purplish nose swelled up in front of his pumice-stone countenance. Clumsily, perhaps, but not without premeditation, I told him that music might grant relief, yes, but it didn't change anything; that after listening to a Mozart symphony you still felt the same way about things.

“Lino,” said Clarisa, and her voice was coming from somewhere else, “Won't you let him go on?”

Caught in a dizzy spell, Lotario clung to the table as if scared of levitating. From the Enclosure, it seemed to me, came a clanging mitigated by the vegetation on the hillocks. Closer, the Sibelius symphony, threads of alfalfa and remains of a ravaged park, was being rebuilt in glimmers heading toward an overpowering theme.

“I might accept that . . .” said Lotario. “But even if music leads nowhere, if sounds are *just because* or an agreement among men, to me this aspect is also extraordinary. Mine is a case in point: music got me out of the hole . . . Exactly, listen: I could also be in my skeleton just because, for no reason. But no, I'm lying . . . What I liked was to think about the invisible breath. And get close to it in any way I could. Obviously, I was no longer in a position to be Bach. But if I wanted to reach the heart of the matter, that safe edge of silence that he touched in the cello partitas, I must at least gorge myself on music. And I decided to do that, believe me. I decided I'd have all the music in my head. I'd be a galaxy—the height of organized dispersion. I would become the most complicated counterpoint in the universe, and after achieving that I'd forget about myself . . . Magnificent, right? Lotario Wald beyond Lotario Wald, just as Beethoven, in the last quartets, hoped to transcend music.”

With such force his laugh burst out, so steeply did it stop that the air seemed to warm up and, lit by the turbid eyes, it combusted. I would have liked to throw a few buckets of water. Because now I *was* scared of

what could happen to us. Raving on a corner of the night, this old man was no longer a dangerous father but the Jewish body of an induced madness, the Golem perhaps, and nothing reassured me that he wouldn't snatch Clarisa away from me in the stench of a spiritual epidemic. She, arms crossed, rocked blandly on her chair. You couldn't say she was expressing anything. She was, rather, the negligible-but-full-of-potential gap between pure appearance and absolute concentration of truth.

In this vein I, who wasn't Lotario's son, rambled on. The old man cleared his throat once more.

"You asked, Clarisa, why I didn't write to you all these years," he said in a lower tone. "Why? You see, you were going about your business, and I was going about mine. I wouldn't give you an unfinished score. . . . I was searching. I. . . . What does it mean that in his last quartets Beethoven attempted to transcend music? What's that phrase when it's at home? I asked myself. Well, for Beethoven music was the music he had received, his teachers' music: Haydn, Mozart, and the music of all those who were further behind, Bach, Monteverdi, if you will, even Gregorian chant. A process toward stability, a rigor, scales, keys, numeric relations among notes—from polyphony, counterpoint, and the art of variation to the ability to dissolve the melody, develop it, and offer it whole again, just as you put an engine together again after having taken everything apart, to the last screw. Which means that there was. . . . a canon, a way of doing. But Beethoven the deaf was flooded with sounds and knew them well, and believed that outside the system, the mechanisms, there was a. . . . purity, a. . . . raw, elemental thing that enabled the system to exist. . . . So, to transcend music is like saying. . . . like saying, I want the world to work better and will make it happen regardless of politics. . . . In quartet 130 the first movement already has a series of different tempos; there are submovements, something unheard-of at the time, and the entire piece is dissociated, like a treasure map that has been torn into little pieces. Number 131, by contrast, is crazy integrated. Seven movements full of correspondences, echoes, the first movement runs parallel to the last, each modulation has an equivalent elsewhere, the whole is a polished sphere. . . . and there's no decoration, no powder; it's not dolled-up music. This quartet is *naked*. It's rough energy—you can't ask it anything. It's radiant, it exists as a swarm of bees can exist. . . . This can't be explained with words. Before it you feel you're stuck, *adhered* to the universe. . . . Okay, I know. About the universe you can't say, it's there. . . . But look, thanks to Beethoven, I stopped caring about a public employee messing up my name. Believe it or not, I've read

a little . . . I know people talk a lot about *realism*. Pérez went into the café to have a cup of coffee—realism. Marta was a blind girl who lived on such and such street—realism. Claptrap! Music is the true realism, the rest is data. Realism is the fact that a piece, let's say, a very well-known piece, *The Four Seasons*, changes with each ensemble interpreting it, with each person listening to it. To me, it's long, to so-and-so, short; to one violinist, it rushes, another one slows it down . . . Always the same piece and always different . . . And my life, too, is different now from yesterday, though it's the same life. Or isn't it? The Earth, too, and yet it's cooler now than ten billion centuries ago . . . How should I know? *Realism*, man. A theme with variations, a thirty-two-bar melody, always with the same omens, the same impossibilities, the same ways of being pleased and of putting your foot in it . . . But if instead of playing it in quarter notes you play it in eighth notes, if you syncopate it, if you bring next to it the same melody but inverted from above or below, if you braid it with phrases that disturb or shine through it, if you take out a bar and a half and insert a commentary in the gap, it seems new and becomes more bearable . . . And that's what I told myself one day: Lotario, life is thirty-two bars endlessly recurring. The more ways you can play them, the closer you'll be to that breath. And also to the dead, to Eugenia and José Brie and your mother and the others. Because the dead have gone back to silence, and music is the best way to give them a home.