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1 One, Two, Three . . . Infinity

RICHARD POWERS

1

My father wanted his own orchestra. He couldn't read music and his tastes tended toward the beer hall, but he loved singing and had a clear bass-baritone: "Blue Skies" at morning that changed, by night, to "Many Brave Hearts Are Asleep in the Deep." When he sang, our small house on the north side of Chicago turned bigger on the inside than it was on the out.

A junior high school principal, my father believed in giving his children the keys to every kingdom worth entering. We each played something: clarinet, French horn, guitar, viola. My instrument was the cello. The five of us would hold forth from different corners of the house, often at the same hour of the afternoon, in a riotous Midwestern nightmare out of Ives.

I remember, at nine, grinding away for what I was sure was hours—*This is, a sym-phony, that Schubert wrote and never fi-nished*—only to be stunned, when coming up for air, to discover that no more than fifteen minutes had passed. None of us loved practicing except my father. No matter how harsh the squeaks and clashes, he had his band.

The exhilarating monotony of practice was, for me, the paradox of childhood writ small. I lived between unbearable excitement and mind-crushing boredom. Those two states formed the twin poles of my days' endless question: *Is it tomorrow, yet?* Late one Sunday morning at the age of nine, I came to my father almost weeping from tedium and begged him to entertain me.

He told me to read a book. I said I'd read every book on my shelf. He went to the bookcase in his own room and picked out a small volume: *One, Two, Three . . . Infinity*, by the renowned physicist George Gamow. I opened it to a table of contents dense with adult type, grim and thrilling. But the biggest thrill of all was that my father thought I might be equal to this.

I struggled. But the first part of the book was called "Playing with Numbers," and I've always loved that thin edge between struggle and play. Page five had a drawing of a poor ancient Roman, taking forever to write out the number one million, which I could do in seven digits. A stunning idea formed in my head as if I myself had come up with it: however high a number anyone wrote down, I could write down one higher. The thought was intoxicating. Before long the book was claiming something far wilder, something that even now, more than half a century later, I still have trouble wrapping my head around: However large an infinite set I named, someone else could name one infinitely larger.

I do not remember the rest of that day, except that it passed in no time at all. My father filled my childhood with lessons, but never one larger than this: there were books that took you to places that never end.

My sons and daughters might have read, from my own sagging shelves, books by several other writers who credit Gamow's little book with starting their own careers. But I never had children, and my every house filled up each afternoon with a whole orchestra of instruments they never practiced.

My father died at 52, of cancer and drink, having outlived much of his life's best music. As I write this, I'm eight years older than he ever reached. Last year I began teaching myself to play piano. No matter how much longer I live, there will be an infinite number of pieces I'll never be able to play or even have time to listen to.

2

What I mostly did in life was fall in love. This happened early and often. "A pretty girl," my father liked to sing, "is like a melody." My first and formative love played the cello in a way that made me jealous of both her and the instrument. I lived eleven years with a pure,

sturdy alto in large part because of how good we sounded when we harmonized. I once broke up with a statuesque model because she called the Beatles silly. For three years, I kept afloat on chaste correspondence built on mutual musical recommendations and disc discoveries. Late in life, when I met a woman who danced to Thomas Tallis while chopping vegetables, I knew it was time to get married.

I never cared what any of my mates listened to. I loved a woman who could not hear a shred of difference between Beethoven and cocktail-bar top forty. I loved a woman who could distinguish four different styles of bluegrass. I loved a woman in whose study hung a poster reading, “Beyoncé and I Will Handle This.”

I used to audition potential partners under the guise of giving gifts. *Here. Do you know this one? Listen to this.* And their eyes, then, would be the best barometer for things to come. I needed only one little thing: for them to lean forward, like Mozart on his visit to Leipzig, shocked into fight-or-flight by the surprise motet of a legendary predecessor, his soul up in his ears, calling out, “What *is* this? Here at last is something one can learn from.”

And many times in life, I got much more than that.

3

When my mother’s operation for lung cancer came to nothing, the hospital still wanted to keep her. And they would have, if it hadn’t been for my brother, the erstwhile French horn player-turned-surgeon. Instead, by miracle, we got her on a plane and across country to my sister, the guitarist, and her farm.

My mother’s last bed looked west. She loved to lie still at dusk and watch as the deer came out of the woods to graze on the stubble in my sister’s fields. On some days, that seemed like the whole point of everything she’d soldiered through in life up to then.

She, too, had had a good voice, and it stuns me now to remember how well she could play the organ, once upon a time. At sight-reading, she was especially good. But when we cleaned and emptied her townhouse after her death, it was clear that she hadn’t touched her little Wurlitzer in a long time.

While my mother still lived, my wife and I made the daylong drive up to the farm as often as possible. In those months, we sat by as

my mother, with unremitting cheer, tried to keep on breathing. She panicked at times, as any creature will when it starts to suffocate. But often her face was very much that of the young woman whose left hand, at those boozy parties that packed the small house on the north side of Chicago, sought out the chords for “The Sunny Side of the Street.”

She had no special need for music at the end. The voices of people in the next room talking to one another as if time were nothing at all: that was the sound she needed.

My family and I were laughing over lunch when I went into her room to check on her. Her eyes were closed and her head tipped up toward the ceiling. Her face wore a look it had never known in life, an expression like the silence just past the last fermata of a good song.

Fast enough to shock me, the mortuary sent us a sealed urn that they said held her ashes. I weighed it in my hands, bobbed it a couple of inches in the air. Of course, the urn must also have held bits of ash from all kinds of strangers, maybe even acquaintances—countless people who wouldn’t have minded sharing a little bit of my mother’s urn.

We were free to spread the ashes anywhere we wanted. We brought them back out west, for a service where people she loved made the music she liked to sing along to.

∞

Reading, love, and death. Those have been my themes, through a life of writing. And music, the thing you’re not supposed to try to write about.

But here’s something I’ve never tried to tell anyone.

I liked to go to concerts alone. That way, I had no responsibility except to my own ears. Liking and not liking never mattered much, with me. What counted was what I could learn to hear.

I was twenty, in the middle of college. My first great love had come and gone and wouldn’t reenter my life for decades. My father would die the following year. My mother would live another third of a century. I had no idea of the years ahead—the loves and deaths and stories I might make out of them. One weekday night, I went alone to a concert of solo violin music performed by an Eastern European vir-

tuoso who, at the age when I was stumbling upon the fact that I could read my father's books, was already performing concerti with major symphony orchestras. I don't remember the entire program. I know only that it concluded with Bach's Partita in D Minor, BWV 1004.

The first four movements passed brilliantly enough. I'd grown up on Bach, and I knew that his touch could turn even a conventional dance suite into something deep and liberated. And I knew about chaconnes, the relentless, repeating variations above a short harmonic pattern or bass line. But nothing I knew or thought I knew prepared me for the Chaconne that ended the partita.

It began simply enough. The little theme emerged over four short measures. By the second variation, I realized that what sounded like eight chord changes in fact disguised the barest four-note bass line: a walk downward from *do* to *sol*. Nothing to it: the oldest trick in the book. Such romanescas were centuries old already when Bach was still in the cradle.

By the fourth variation, I could hear the gist. By the seventh, I sat forward on the edge of my chair, thinking, *Oh. Oh! Something's happening. We're going somewhere.* By himself, up on stage, the virtuoso wrestled with the theme. The twists he and Bach produced came in a steady stream, increasingly spacious, endlessly imaginative, built up from the barest building blocks.

Slow, sharp, languid, leaping: Each twist was shot through with its own distilled essence. Playfulness rubbed up against reticence, introspection lay next to full-out longing. I stopped counting and sat back, opened by the immense architecture rising in the air in front of me, under the fingers of a solo violinist.

Variations unfolded, one after the other after the other, inventive, elaborate versions of that tiny, four-note trip turning relentlessly back home. This was music built out of the smallest, simplest genes, assembled into endless forms too large to make out. I no longer knew what I was listening to, whether transpositions, diminutions, augmentations, counterpoint, fragmentation, displacement, or interpolation. What *I* heard was patience, sorrow, conviction, regret, grace, thanksgiving, delight in sheer dexterity, endurance turning slowly into a spacious *yes*, gameness in the face of restrictive pattern, and a nimble doubling down on that same determining scheme until crazed obeisance became its own escape.

A dozen variations rose up and disappeared. Then another dozen. The formulaic began to overflow into the unpredictable; the puppet got up and walked. Thirty variations in, and the massive minor of the piece brightened without warning into major, as if, at the lightest breeze, a hand swept aside the steely cloud cover and turned the sky ridiculous with blue.

The eternally recurring four-note descent grew obsessed with visiting every color on the emotional spectrum. In time, it returned to the minor, where it had begun. But somewhere in its sixty-four turns, the immense, passionate clockwork triggered something that, forty years on, I still can't explain. The light in the room dimmed and turned grainy. The floor of the auditorium fell away. Although the soloist wrestled on with yet one more intricate sequence of parallel structure, I drifted into the still spot at the center of spinning space. Time rose and fell like the planet breathing, leaving me aloft, floating on an upwell of pitches that, endlessly changing, held fixedly in place. All sense of my separateness dissolved in an ocean that rolled over everyone in the hall, everyone I'd known, everything I was or hoped to be.

I don't know how long I floated on that stillness. It astonished me, when the movement ended, to discover that the whole massive Chaconne had lasted only—only!—a bit more than fifteen minutes.

Years later I chanced on these words of Nietzsche, and that bot-tomless moment came back to me:

Did you ever say yes to a single pleasure? Oh, friends, then you also said yes to all pain. All things are joined, entangled, smitten with one another.

I'm not a mystical person. This is the only life we get. I don't believe in the immortal soul, but for a moment outside of time, I knew what it felt like to have one. *Do, ti, la, sol*. Bach's Chaconne asks: *What can we make, here on this Earth, out of nothing at all?* And then it answers its own question: *Anything*. One, two, three, *four* . . . infinity. All that you've ever felt, all you have lived through—the sharpest excitement, the dullest boredom, the deepest grief, the softest joy—however much life gives you, there's more.

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