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AUGUST 20, 2017 BY **ADMIN**

BACKSTAGE WITH TO LOVE A STRANGER: MUSIC AND THE WRITING LIFE

“ Sam couldn’t land a decent job. He knew he shouldn’t expect any different; he had picked the world’s least practical line of work, and he got what was coming to him. A young nobody-from-nowhere conductor with a Pennsylvania backwater twang in his voice and a tiny resume to his name should consider himself lucky to get the lowest-tier orchestra that had ever hacked through a song or two. Sam knew that. Even so, as he went through round after round of auditions during the wet grey spring of 1986, he dared to dream about a job that would let him stand up on a stage in front of a crowd and make the kind of music that would change the world. Music could do that, if you held the threads



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of it in your hands and gave it your soul to take into itself." – from *To Love A Stranger*

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As a professional musician and fiction writer, I often get asked about the balance between those two creative "lives" and how they intersect with and push against, or support, each other. The subject fascinates me, because writing and music have both been part of my life for as long as I can remember. I started telling stories when I was three, and wrote my first one at age six, around the same time I started playing the piano.

Early on in my musical training, I began thinking of music and instruments as living things. The piano I practiced on as a kid, which I spent unknown numbers of hours playing over the course of many years, was a beloved friend. It knew my hands. It answered my touch and responded to anything I asked of it. When I practiced, making music felt like talking to the instrument, as if it and I were having a conversation that communicated more than words ever could. Anything I thought or felt, even the most difficult things – *especially* the most difficult things – had an outlet in what I played. The piano always understood.

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When I went to college, and then graduate school, and had the chance to be part of big ensembles working on large-scale pieces,

the living nature of music became all the more clear and urgent to me. For a piece like Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, or J. S. Bach's *St. John Passion*, or Handel's *Messiah*, you're bringing dozens of people together to create a single work of art. All those minds, all those thoughts and feelings, all those different lines of energy join up to make the whole. Rehearsals are amazing enough, but on performance night, when you have the white stage lights on you and the energy from the audience in the hall to lift you up and carry you along: performances are mind-blowing.

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“When you rehearsed, you treated phrases and even individual notes like pearls. You buffed them one at a time, strung them together with careful attention. There was no such thing as spending too much time on any one moment. All of them were essential.

In performance, you forgot all of that.

The notes were not pearls anymore. They were rubies and emeralds, amethysts and sapphires, or they were pieces of colored tile in a mosaic, or they were drops of paint in the largest mural you ever saw. They flowed past and poured around you. You stood in a living stream of color.

When Sam stood in front of the orchestra with the white lights on him and the audience behind, he could not imagine anyone not wanting to give up their whole self, down to the last drop, to this.

Beethoven, the deaf genius, had felt like an outcast because his failing hearing isolated him from the world. He stormed and shouted, raged at God, lived in constant physical pain. Out of that, he wrote this music.

The strings were velvet, and the winds were silver. Their individual lines of melody met and blended at the podium. In the voices of the instruments coming together, Sam heard the voice of the other Maestro, the real one who had written this piece. By the end of his life, Beethoven couldn't stand up on a podium alone to conduct his own music, or sit at a piano to play in public, because his ears would not tell him what his hands were doing. Sam could imagine that Maestro's voice in its gravelly roughness. *You, boy, it said. What are you going to do?*

The best I can, Sam told it. Sir."

Bach Johann Sebastian, St John Passion, BWV 245...



My first novel, *To Love A Stranger*, came directly out of my own performance experiences. *Stranger* was released this past May and has its roots specifically in the backstage world of the symphony, with its intense dramatic energy and its larger-than-life people. Classical musicians are a brilliant, kaleidoscopic breed. Each of us bonds with our instrument, our only companion during our many solo hours in the practice room. Our instruments come to define us. Each one comes with a set of common player-traits, so common in fact that they're stereotypes, but that doesn't make them less true.

Pianists, for instance – my people – are solitary and shy. We don't get to go out and play very often with the other kids. (Ask a professional pianist how many hours she spent practicing, as a kid, while her friends went to the movies or partied or met up at the basketball court. Then ask her if she minded.) Orchestras don't include keyboard all that often, except if you're a concerto soloist, which is a very different experience. Unless we work as accompanists, most often we huddle alone in our musical shells. The wonderful thing about piano, though, is that it does work so well as a solo instrument. There's very little you can't do alone,

because the piano provides an almost limitless range of tones and colors.

On the opposite end of the social spectrum, you find singers. They're anything but shy. Boisterous and dramatic, gregarious, they're used to spending their lives onstage, playing to an audience. Wind and brass players often fall somewhere in the middle. They can be obsessive about their instruments, which are highly sensitive to temperature and humidity, and any slight damage to any component of their structure can mean the difference between success and catastrophe, but these players are also confident in their own musical voices and steady under pressure. String players tend to be team members, used to moving in packs. And conductors, who have to bring all the contrasting and conflicting personalities together and weave the threads of music into a cohesive work of art: conductors are, usually, the most dramatic, demanding, and larger-than-life of all.

The classical music world handed me characters for my novel. My main character, Sam, is a conductor, and my second-place character, Jeannette, is a pianist. The book revolves around an orchestra's performance seasons, with all of the personalities involved, and the different kinds of drama and sources of stress that you find in a large-scale organization that lives by its production calendar. On top of this, both Sam and Jeannette have secrets in their private lives, which threaten to undermine the future they hope to build together.

I found, though, in writing the book, that more important than the characters, and the natural sources of drama in the setting, was the backdrop of the music itself. The music, especially the energy and exaltation of performance, was a driving force in writing *To Love A Stranger*. I wanted to capture the power of it and translate it to the page, so that readers could share it. Now that the book is out, I've loved hearing from readers who describe the music as a character in itself.

© Pictures at an exhibition - Suite in ten movement...



“Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures from an Exhibition* would raise the dead right out of the ground...

Jeannette sat up straight in her chair as the solo trumpet began the opening fanfare. You would have to be dead indeed if you didn’t sit up when those sharp silver notes lanced the air. The deep brass and low strings joined in, and the earthy-sounding chords filled the concert hall like the smell of pine.

When Jeannette was in high school, her teacher had let her try to learn the piano version of this piece. She’d had to figure out for herself that she didn’t have the physical power it demanded. At first she had been disappointed when she practiced until she ached all over and still couldn’t make the piano sing the way she wanted. Now she didn’t know how one piano by itself could compete with the rainbow of sounds in this hall.

The second movement, ‘The Old Castle,’ had been the only section she played well. She closed her eyes now and let the ghostly litany wrap around her. In her mind she saw ruins, collapsed turrets and crumbled walls, the only remnants left of past and lost things.

Near the end of the movement, she opened her eyes to watch Sam. His face in profile had the intensity she only saw when he and the music were wrapped together. He might lock the door on his own thoughts sometimes, shut everyone – even her – out of his soul, but here, in this hall, that soul lay out in the open for everyone to see....

‘The Old Castle’ faded away. The Pictures continued. Jeannette watched as the motions of Sam’s hands and arms created every note: moments of intimacy and tenderness and moments so powerful the walls should have shivered and crumbled to dust. He created them all as if they had never happened before.”

Music naturally fed my first novel, but it’s also played other roles in my writing life. After spending a few hours bludgeoning my brain for words, there’s something profoundly soothing and recharging about settling into a form of nonverbal communication. When I hit a roadblock in my work, sitting down at the piano is often a powerful cure. The fingers do their own thing, and the subconscious mind problem-solves.

Goodbye Pork Pie Hat



In addition, music and words can form an effective dialogue and directly inspire each other. Several years ago, I listened to a recording of jazz composer Charles Mingus's tune "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," which was written after the death of legendary jazz saxophonist Lester Young. Listening to jazz, depending on how improvisatory or "out" it is, can sometimes be a challenge for me, but in this case, the music spoke to me immediately. Melancholy, lingering, and evocative, it demanded a written response. The [story](#) I wrote for it is the only one that's ever come out of my imagination in a single shot.

Recently, I've started experimenting with another kind of music-and-words dialogue, interspersing music between sections of a reading. As a listener takes in the words, and follows the line of a story, music can give him a chance to digest what he's heard, reflect on it, and prepare for the next segment of the writing. The music also forms an automatic response to the words, giving the listener an emotional context and outlet for the story. On my [blog](#), I'm starting a series which explores that kind of blended performance.

Fly Away Home, with Beethoven Sonata Op 14 no 1,...



I've been asked sometimes whether it's difficult to balance these two creative pursuits, and whether I would choose to focus on one

or the other. Balance can be a challenge, but so far, it's working. These two fields complement and support each other much more often than they clash, and I find it hard to imagine a life without one foot in each world.

Excerpts from To Love A Stranger, copyright 2016 by Kris Faatz, printed by permission from Blue Moon Publishers



Kris Faatz (rhymes with skates) is a pianist, writer, and teacher. Her first novel, To Love A Stranger, was a finalist for the 2016 Schaffner Press

*Music in Literature Award and was released May 2017 by Blue Moon Publishers (Toronto). Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, including Kenyon Review Online, Potomac Review, and Reed. When not at work, she enjoys hiking and exploring the outdoors. Visit her online, and check out her *Storytelling and Sound* blog, at <http://krisfaatz.com>.*

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