

REFLECTIONS IN COUNTERPOINT

By Janis Hutchinson ©

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The rigid legs of the wooden chair screeched against the classroom floor as Mrs. Waterbury, my high school piano teacher, shoved it out from behind her desk. She stood up and stepped around in front, adjusting the coiled knot of smoky-gray hair that rested at the nape of her neck.

"Play middle C," she said.

It was my turn at the piano that day, and I dutifully plunked the key down. The harsh, twangy tone sounded from beneath the mahogany instrument's half-opened lid.

"No," she said. "Play it, not murder it!" She rushed over, and slid onto the oblong bench beside me. I ducked my head, hiding my stricken look.

She raised her finger, poising it dramatically above the keyboard. Slowly, it floated downward until the ball of her finger pressed into the ivory key. The heel of her hand dipped down to the left, circled and came up in an arc to the right. The warm, vibrant "C" resonated throughout the room as her finger slowly pivoted up and away from the key with a graceful flourish. "Few," she said, sliding off the bench, "know how to play C."

The knot in my stomach tightened. My hope of becoming a concert pianist was dashed. Nevertheless, what she said next opened a whole new world for me.

"Remember, class," she added, stepping back behind her desk. "'C' means, see. When combined with other notes and enhanced by instruments, you will see something you never saw before.

To illustrate this, she had us listen to Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. My dull, gray existence expanded into brilliancy, as I found myself delightfully skipping along with Peter into the grassy meadow, cringing when french horns warned of the wolf's presence, and lamenting when the dirge-like oboe portrayed the sad end of the duck. When Peter lowered the lasso around the wolf's tail I cheered and jubilantly marched off with the cast of characters in the finale's triumphant procession.

Next, we listened to Smetana's *Moldau*. I found myself buoyantly swept up into the rolling boil of the river's current. Whirling atop the swells and surges, I glided in glittering gurgles of pure joy, hugging slopes and hillsides, and passing village festivals along green-wooded, Bohemian banks.

"Now," Mrs. Waterbury concluded, "you have seen what the composers intended you to see. But, the real magic of music comes when you see beyond that--when it touches an emotional chord deep inside you and causes you to see your own life.

At age fourteen, she rather lost me on that; but I honestly tried. I listened to Sousa's bold and precise metronomic marches, wishing that my life could be punctuated with that kind of strength and significance. Debussy's *Clair de Lune* made me long for a peaceful, serene life--away from the despair of an unhappy home and my miserable sense of worthlessness.

Try as I did, I could see nothing about my life in any of the music. While *Peter and the Wolf* was enjoyable, Sousa and Debussy's music only made me long for something that I didn't have. To find a musical composition that truly reflected the distressing realities of my life would require finding one that was even more dissonant and clashing than Khatchaturian's *Sabre Dance*. Yet,

who would want to listen to something like *that*?

Then, in open-mouthed astonishment, I listened to one of Bach's fugues. Chaotic counterpoints violently fought against each other, as tangles of kaleidoscopic notes viciously slammed into the helpless melody. Bach fit. It exactly matched my life!

But, as much as I identified with all that cacophony, there was one drawback. What was the point of all that perpetual, directionless struggling? Was there any end in sight? Or was Bach, like myself, powerless to control his own music?

Unfortunately, the school bell rang before the piece ended.

"See you on Monday," Mrs. Waterbury called, pushing the stop button on the recorder.

I walked out of the classroom, intrigued. I felt some kind of enigmatic bond to Bach and knew that I had to hear the end. Maybe at the conclusion of the composition something would predict who would win--the counterpoints, or the helpless melody. I dashed to the school library, checked out the recording and rushed home.

Alone in my bedroom I shoved it into the tape deck and flipped the switch. The singular notes lilted through the silence of my room--but not for long. Furious counterpoints charged in with window-rattling intensity. I grabbed a ruler as a baton, and began orchestrating all the incomprehensible notes of his composition.

In mighty sweeps and flourishes, I kept pace with the quarrelsome notes that rushed in to overwhelm the poor, struggling melody--a melody that simply wanted to sing its own song. Continuing my frenzied conducting, I hoped that by the end, the fugue-like jumble would somehow unscramble into a meaningful structure. Then, as Mrs. Waterbury promised, I would see something about my life--some definitive design that would reveal the why of everything, and show that the melody could survive despite the opposition.

My baton whipped back and forth, up and down, following the helter-skelter race of turbulent notes that swirled about me. The crescendos and dynamics of my tangled life rose and plunged as the relentless counterpoints hurled my hopeless existence out of control.

As my life intertwined with that of Bach's fugue, the thunderous, incongruous notes amazingly played themselves out in a strange synthesis of unity and diversity. Soon, I began to delight in the effusive experience.

Then, something unexpected happened. With soul-awakening harmonies, the counterpoints began to sidle alongside the original melody and gradually yield to the same rhythmic pace. Moving into a purposeful pattern, the notes fused into a connective continuity, melded into a dynamic whole and merged into an ingenious synthesis. No longer were they fighting against each other, but riding upon a resplendent continuum!

But, it was the conclusion that totally overwhelmed me. Bach ended his piece, not in a conglomeration of conflicting melodies still fighting against each other, but with a slow, deliberate and grand momentous coming together of harmonizing chords. All the scattered and diverse melodies were no longer at odds with each other, but met together with full purpose and meaning. I quivered with anticipation as the final, impassioned chords came together in synchronic, thunderous tones like the doxology of a heavenly choir. In a majestic Amen, they burst open the door to my soul, flooding my heart with an indefinable, but resonating assurance. Then...all was still.

In the flow of silence that followed, like the interpretive hush following a period at the end of a sentence, the final, impassioned note punctuated the full meaning of my schizophrenic existence,

revealing design, purpose and ultimate fulfillment.

I sank onto the edge of my bed.

"Wow," I whispered, "I see! I *can* survive the counterpoints. Whatever lays ahead of me--even if chaotic and discordant--like Bach, I can orchestrate the whole, wondrous composition of my life to a harmonizing end!"

I instinctively leaped to my feet.

"Bravo!" I shouted.

THE END

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