

10.01*

Timothy Mathews**

*“Criticism is an art of translation, to do with
meaning on the move, in transit, in
transformation from moment to moment inside
a signifying flux.”*
- Malcom Bowie, adapted

“To think limit is the same thing as to cross it.”
- Theodor Adorno, adapted

Revisiting the images of an exhibition, listening to pieces of music over and over — it’s quite a commonplace to say there are farewells involved, and a resistance to them as well: a resistance to letting these things go without saying goodbye, perhaps, or having done anything like the work of giving back, of saying something, anything, in return, of acknowledging the gift of personhood, its shape and its life.

Gift, not demand. Or despair. Or release either.

But responding, instead of resisting or endlessly hesitating, seems to involve revealing a secret that remains hidden.

Or a shared incapacity to speak. I remember one person gliding over the sparkles and the inwardness of Schubert’s music like the flat, undeniable brightness of the sunset on a still sea. I remember another saying it was too terrifying to listen to anymore. I remember another still diving further and further into what it means to write about music, while listening in silence as the silence that engulfed him approached. I remember as a teenager playing some of the pieces, the only ones in my grasp, I remember the feeling of a voice for me, and of having to stand up for it, against all the that’s too slow, too fast, too elastic; having to acknowledge that the tempo of my playing came from my capabilities, my hearing, and my slow way of reading also; and that measuring tempo would never come naturally to me either. So I just kept playing, see what happens next,

* Ensaio recebido em 06/12/2024. Aprovado em 10/12/2024.

** Professor emérito de Francês e Literatura Comparada pela University College London. E-mail: t.mathews@ucl.ac.uk . ORCID: 0000-0002-8259-2075.

which was far too little, so little beyond myself would I ever go; still, there was the sound of a self as I played and played. And I remember another knowing only to bear witness by assembling a group to bear witness together. The same one that also embarrassed me into understanding that one and only time the meaning of blasphemy, as she rode on her memory and compared my playing years and years before to the sublime performance we'd all just heard. It had filled me, filled whatever shape I could feel I had, in a moment that transported me into that living point, full of grey light with the breeze in my hair, and the quiet bubbling of people unable to find the words. And I remembered then, and again now, saying to another still, that the music was quietly filled, to the exclusion of everything else, with love.

Another time we'd been to different music, a *Requiem Mass* with such a tenacious hold on life that I'd said to him I'd never heard music so had little to do with death, and with so little interest in it. Whatever the minor keys, the energy of Mozart's setting of the liturgy, the energy of the limbs and voices of the musicians performing it, had everything to do with an obstinate fascination with vitality; and the coming-and-going luminescence little to do with the transcendence, and everything to do with people compelled to speak, to mime, and yell in tune the pressures of which their voices and breath are made.

A bit later, on the other hand, in a moment when everything had imploded, and compelled me to shed everything up to the quietest sounds, I discovered, as though re-discovering, a tune from Mozart's own sonatas. I was again listening to them all in sequence by then, over and over, and once surprised, could then sense, translated within me, the formal transitions emerging that allow that surprise to appear, and the tune to grow. The surprise of purity. The ability to hear without owning or knowing, to call something pure, and be rescued by it. Think of a mirror immersed in transparently coloured layers, no person reflected, a person standing aside, immersed in the freedom to sense the child in the adult, and follow the receding lines of a new beginning. Like revealing a secret that remains hidden.

But the melodies in Schubert's sonatas don't reveal the same secrets to me, or shine in the same hidden revelation.

Nor is the same life-long pilgrimage involved. At a point along the road, I found a way to take the 10.01 Eurostar to Paris to hear these pieces performed. I went to two of

Daniel Barenboim's recitals at the Philharmonie de Paris, the second time alone, as I am now, a speck in a crowd with you. And as though waiting for me, the night I got back it all began, what had been going on for a long while, but suddenly now there was only the long end. And denial. Shock and denial. Caring for the living by denying the end of life. Right to the end. Then seeing afterwards, living afterwards with the consequences of denial, seeing the failings, already occurred and yet to come, all the self-persistence and wrap-around shock, a shock that's already occurred, occurring now, yet to occur, all wrapped in itself and wrapping him up in his own oneness. When he should have been caring, caring better, listening better, and more, and wider. Denial breathes, and never helps, however much it insists on life, on living and giving, and whatever the strength it mirages, even generosity.

People wonder at the emotional range of these sonatas. Some even attach descriptives, suggestions, evocations. Each person engaging with music in a moment of their own, perhaps especially with music without words, will likely come up against the futility, the inconsequence, the betrayal even, or simply the despair of trying to attach a narrative, a life-story, or an understanding of history to the effects of music; which nonetheless involve all of those, and more. How quickly saying anything about them dissolves into commonplace. Still, music survives it seems, of all kinds, and how could it, without the need to communicate why it matters, why it matters to someone, who will then need, it seems, to tread a line with the personal on one side, and the subjective on the other; and something like an abstracted person can start to circulate, speaking indirectly to the personhood in others.

A beginning. There's a quietness around every note, and its connection to the next, as though quietness were needed for the sound to be heard, and to become music, as though music began with fragility, with repeated pleas to resist disappearance, just as a note on the piano dies on the air as it's struck. These notes, which every time played are left hanging in the beauty of their unfolding, once again seek without finding the place, the history, the charting, even the staves of their life and their hearing. They are chords rather than single notes, simple chords, the work of harmony seems reduced to its basics, almost unnoticed, with melody arising from this almost. And as though imagination rested on hesitancy, here's a listener responding to tempo as to a practice, to practice as to an

attention to impulse, to impulse as a further instrument played silently behind the keys, doubling them, and together they follow a light that dims no other.

At the very end of this movement, this journey of returns and echoes, of repeated absorption and renewal, there's no release, and instead there's the imitation, in sound and harmony, of dissolution, of harmony as well, even of playing: like an imitation of an ending that only imitation can achieve, clinging as I am to every note played, played and disappearing, clinging in hope to this playing, its circulation among people there and not there, and to love.

Music beginning in quietness, and ending scattered – what came in between? Everything seems to happen in being announced, modulation shifts mood seamlessly, patiently, with a naturalness, with a spontaneity that includes surprise, that has the power of amazement, as still more is allowed to emerge from a quiet imitation of music, classical music adored in its simplest elements. From quietness to tenderness, there is also seamless suddenness, an urgency, as though heard again, and announced in transition this time, as though I'm hearing what I've always waited to hear, understanding suddenly that I can, and how offerings are accepted when inhibition dissolves.

Just in the way the melody moves from major to minor, as though breathing, as though discovering itself in its echoes, just in that way another appears. They seem to belong together, and there's an interdependency, an intimacy, in the way the second unfolds from the membranes of the first. Borrowing from pictures I've just seen, perhaps it's like depth emerging from different coloured lacquers pressed to the back of a pane of glass, that remain immobile only for the contrasts to emerge before they flow in the mind. Elements from the first tune, or indication of a tune, or the imitation of one, or the recall, begin to dance in the forms taken by the second, in a light as bright and fearless as freedom, even in the darkness that insists, suddenly, but then once again moderated by sparkling ornamentation, and its unconditional grace. And the repeats are like an insistence, as though performing an ability to wear sanity like a living skin, an openness that evolves each time, as it's even shaped in the far distance.

This mesmerising interplay of absorption and transition develops into a drama of acceptance and reaction, embrace and shock, assertion and collapse, gaiety and disappearance, which for a moment in the middle develops, all transition for a moment

lost, into despair, insisting on its own sound vocabulary as though there were nothing else to hear. And then once again there is something, the dance simply occurs, the ornamentation as well, reduced to its simplest, but once again vulnerable to cracks, the snap and the bellowing of loss, uncompromising and nailed, like the short repeated notes of the dance that begin to beat out its rhythm once again, now in a lightness with its own insistence, its own capacity to follow the major and minor in sequence unending, unresolved, both melancholic and hopeful, open.

As though the harmonics were preserved in their silencing. But this is love without redemption. In continuing, there is only forgiveness, for only the open wound is accepted. As the piece, its shifts and shapes become clearer to me over many hearings, that clarity is like a denial, the one that lives and breathes and seeks the light. In the same rhythm of my being open to it, a new piece starts, a new melody arises again, from more remnants of musical elements at their simplest. It allows its minor. It allows the tears and the rips of the death and suffering of others, unreachable just like your own. It's the music of civilisation, it reaches out against deafness, and seeks out the goodness of people in their ones and two's who still fail to hear, or act, for they cannot, and still the light shines ahead, the light-filled distances joining us from afar in seclusion, in the failures that burn us, and still the hope, like a truth, that hopelessness will breathe at least compassion, and from there humility, and from there the grains of belief that even the failure to hear has a sound, the irremediably inward shrieking and seeking, that's accepted, and forgiven. For it dares to hear, to live the unknown fragility of others, still, and the responsibility. Please don't die, please don't cry, for I'll only hear where I can't follow, and there lies the only acceptance that lives, the major that insists, and the only hope that offers.

Some entries on the first movement of Schubert's piano sonata no. 18 in G, with echoes from his others.

This lyric essay is a version of the one in Chronicles of Art and Hope, published later in 2025 by Ma Bibliothèque. This is a collection where in response to more artworks, various forms of writing help me shine various lights on force, on vulnerability, and on ways to reach out without stifling.