

The Good Old Days

By Michael Parra

My Dear Modia!

My life is in order, as much as it can be when the lack of money is great, as it has been since I have returned to Moscow. It is hopeless to wait for the competition as it will take place not on the 1st of January but only on August 1, next year (1875). I am engrossed in the composition of a piano concerto and want Rubinstein to play it at the concert; but it is not coming easily and well. I have, as a duty, to force my brain to invent piano passages, with the result that my nerves are very strained.

~ Pyotr Tchaikovsky

The sky was a tufted gray. It would clear before the concert finished that evening, but the stars and future were hidden from view. A merciless autumn wind cycloned brittle Sycamore leaves around Michael Parra's ankles as he approached the auditorium. Louise M. Davies Hall bows around a corner as if in deference to her venerated, older sisters, the War Memorial Opera House with its pretentious Greek columns, and across Van Ness Avenue, the gilded dome of City Hall, stately whore that she is. Louise turns her face, offering a cheek to the avenue and her entrance to a side street, Grove, her red lacquer marquee tastefully trimmed by a pearl necklace of lights. This demur aspect of the building is a ruse. Her tall, broad panes of greenish plate glass orbit contemporary chrome chandeliers and ascending tiers of glittering staircases as though she were a carousel and the prestigious San Francisco Symphony her calliope. Mr. Parra paid no attention to her proud architecture, preferring the legacy and artifice of the opera house across the street where Michael had history of his own. True, he danced there only a single season, now almost two decades past; but the memory served as a beacon - Michael's shining trophy to his time on the planet. He drew his overcoat closer around him, worried about his good pair of brown leather shoes and lamented his forgotten umbrella. October was unpredictable.

He spied his friend and fitness client Alexander Slovin on the opera house steps, laughing with a cohort of fresh faces dangling cigarettes, all cloaked in formal black. Alexander looked as though he could step in as soloist if needed, and indeed Michael knew he was studying the B flat minor. A crisply tailored black suit hugged Alexander's small frame. He flashed his smile devilishly, an effect heightened by a fastidious goatee, coffee colored skin and princely Asian features. Michael bounded up the stairs, hoping to appear younger than his fifty-one years.

Alexander embraced Michael. He held his former trainer close and then released him when the noxious sting of smoke repelled the older man. Alexander waved away the wafting interference with a black leather hand. He claimed that the gloves were borne of necessity, poor peripheral circulation; but these accessories appeared regardless of weather. He told Michael that his fingers, not his baby grand, were his instrument. He treated them with reverence, as

repositories of hope. Had Heaven heard his prayers, Alexander said, he rather than renowned pianist Yundi Li, would be joining the Symphony on stage tonight. Michael imagined Alexander waving away accolades between sips of Veuve Clicquot in a dark limousine. Instead, Alexander would ride a graffiti ridden subway back to a dim apartment, crowded with dusty manuscripts.

One day Alexander Slovin would have his wish. He would be the toast of high society and internationally booked three years in advance; but he had no way of knowing that was to come. Alexander had given himself until age forty to secure an orchestral contract or quit music altogether. Tonight he was thirty-five, the same age as Tchaikovsky when he penned his first concerto. Alexander had a way of pausing before he spoke as though his words required cross referencing among a vast library of information.

“As I was saying, the tonal scheme is based upon a semitone shift to D major, a key that has been anticipated in the middle of the preceding Andantino semplice; but enough of that. Allow me to introduce you to my personal trainer. Michael Parra this is —“

“Thanks Alex, but we know each other. Leslie created my web site and Jason is a former roommate.” Leslie was a clarinetist and Jason played trumpet. Both of them were recent additions to the symphony’s roster. “Those were wonderful times, weren’t they guys? What are you doing way over here? I’d expect to see you outside the Davies’ stage door. Won’t your director allow you to smoke in public?” Leslie crushed the offending ember beneath an elegant black pump.

“Nah, Tilson-Thomas isn’t even in town tonight. The guest maestro is Osmo Vanska. He’s pretty good. Anyway, I don’t think we’d get in any trouble...”

“Thank God for unions,” Jason interjected.

“...it just doesn’t look good to our colleagues or our audience. Not that we do this often, but you know...we’re wind instrumentalists after all.”

“Hey Alexander,” Jason said, relishing a final drag, “Have you and Jessica set a date?”

“I...we...” Tears welled in Alexander’s obsidian eyes and his lower lip began to tremble. “It’s over,” he said, and then he spun around and marched across Grove Street into the welcoming sanctuary of Louise.

For the genius, the lowly mechanical work is doubly difficult. Tchaikovsky’s hours of teaching theory passed for him in gloomy file. He was clearly bored, barely able to stifle his yawns. My youthful impressions of his first lessons in harmony are so vivid! How well I remember his appearance at that time: young, with fair, almost handsome features, a deep, soulful gaze in his handsome dark eyes, bushy, carelessly combed hair and a marvelous auburn beard, dressed rather poorly and carelessly, most often in a threadbare gray jacket...I would sometimes see him at symphonic concerts, in the company of two or three students, in the gallery, sitting on the steps leading to the upper foyer; and meanwhile downstairs one of his masterpieces was being performed for the first time. When the rapturous audience loudly called for the composer, Pyotr Ilyich

would appear on stage in his plain gray jacket looking bashful and embarrassed and, as if reluctantly, would give an awkward bow.

~ Rostislav Genika, 1871

Michael dodged honking taxis, then bobbed impatiently in line, hoping to glimpse Alexander among the throng of dark suits and vividly hued gowns. The race across the street winded Michael. His own exhalations wheezed in his ears like the broken whistle of a tea kettle; but these days it was a minor inconvenience. Many years had passed since he'd required the relief of an inhaler. Never in his sickly, tortured, interminable adolescence would he have guessed that he'd one day become a dancer, an athlete of sorts, and then a personal trainer. 'Breathe!' he counseled himself.

Depth, volume, velocity and ease: the four qualities of breath. One's success in life can also be evaluated with these categories. Of the four, ease is the trait that shirks measurement. Difficulty level is subject to interpretation and relative to one's past experience. Like many people, Mr. Parra only appreciated accomplishment as a triumph over adversity – The more bitter the fight, the sweeter the victory. At present Michael trained only a dozen clients. He had no way of knowing that his fitness business would triple in the next two years. His reputation was exploding. Other trainers wanted to work with him, and he would eventually find himself managing a faculty of five and convening luxury retreats in exotic lands. At the moment however, his vision encompassed only his past artistic achievements. He checked the ten-dollar watch he'd purchased at Longs Drugs, brown wrist band to match his shoes. Fifteen minutes until curtain.

The perfectly coiffed blonde woman in line ahead of him flaunted jewels worth more than Michael earned in a year. She dazzled. Layers of pale, yellow chiffon cascaded over small breasts and slender hips to a scalloped hem just below hyper extending knees. She had ankles that everted highly arched feet, a slight anterior tilted pelvis and reduced cervical lordosis, in a word – flawless. It was only when she turned profile to speak to her date, a handsome, brawny young man, that Michael recognized the young lady.

Jessica, Alexander's former fiancée.

The man looked as though he too came from family money. They seemed well suited. In Michael's recollection, Jessica had always had something of the cheerleader about her. As the usher took her ticket, Jessica appeared to partially collapse, a half faint that compelled her date to embrace her tenderly around the waist. She recovered quickly with an embarrassed smile.

It was a dishonorable, even tacky bit of manipulation in Michael's opinion. What he didn't know was that the young man was Jessica's gay first cousin, and that her swoon was genuine. Jessica had yet to tell anyone about her blackout episodes, not her cousin, not Alexander. Everyone, including Jessica, would be surprised that a brain aneurism would bring about her death before the new year. Tonight, however, she was simply tending to a visiting relative and a broken heart.

Alexander didn't know that his almost-bride was in the building. Michael found him at the upper gallery bar, tossing back a whiskey with a still-gloved hand, another full shot ready at his elbow.

"So Michael, what do you think? Should I have ended it with Jessie? I'm truly miserable without her. Perhaps I should call her..."

Michael grimaced and motioned for the bartender to set up another round. Alexander pulled out his wallet.

"No Alex, I wouldn't think of it. Allow me."

Alexander grinned at the bartender. "Ah, if I'd known he was buying I would have ordered better than Dewar's."

"One last time Michael, please advise me. Was I wrong to let her go?"

"Let's not talk about your failed romance," Michael replied. "Not tonight. This is supposed to be a festive occasion, a good time, even though it brings our professional association to an end." For the past two years, Alexander had hired Michael for weekly fitness training sessions. Earnings wrung from piano students and a day job at an Italian bakery in North Beach paid for his petite but trim physique. Last week, mere days after the breakup with Jessica, the bakery had closed. Jobless and despondent, Alexander informed Michael that he could no longer afford his services. Tonight's entertainment was an extravagance meant to buttress their friendship even as it signaled a farewell to their business arrangement.

"What?" Alexander protested. "Not a word? You must have an opinion, a...rescue. Say something, anything!"

"Alex, Alex, Alex...as I said, this is a happy night. Let us not speak of intolerable circumstances." He handed the pessimistic pianist another glass. "To a bright future!"

Audience chimes sounded the two-minute call.

"Shall we find our seats? I believe we're in the center balcony section," Michael said, grateful that their limited finances removed them from a potential altercation with Jessica.

"We might as well..." Alexander drained his glass with snap of his head. "We could stay here at the bar through the entire first piece for all I care. Why begin such a melodic program with music entitled 'Earbix'? I'll sit through The Dvorak Seventh, but John Adams? And why sandwich the piano concerto in between the other two? Poor Tchaikovsky! You know, the composer had a deplorable time on that Christmas Eve when he first presented the work to his two friends, both pianists named Nikolay. One was Nikolay Hubert and the other Tchaikovsky's beloved mentor Nikolay Rubinstein. If only he could have known today, one hundred thirty-four years later, that his concerto would be acclaimed a masterpiece and one of the staples of our modern repertoire."

"Come. Let's hear the Adams. Maybe we'll learn something."

The audience chimes sounded again. By the time the two men took their seats the house lights were dim and the other patrons mere shadows.

I played the first movement. Not a single word, not a single comment! If only you could have known how foolish, how intolerable is the position of a man when he

offers his friend food he has prepared, and his friend eats it and says nothing. Say something, if only to tear it to pieces with constructive criticism – but for God’s sake, just one kind word, even if not of praise! Rubinstein was preparing his thunder and Hubert was waiting until the position clarified and the moment arrived to come down on one side or the other...Rubinstein’s eloquent silence had tremendous significance. It was as though he was saying to me: ‘My friend, can I talk about details when the very essence of the thing disgusts me?’ I fortified my patience, and played on to the end. Again silence. I got up and asked, ‘Well?’

~ Pyotr Tchaikovsky, 1874

‘Earbix’ was tolerated. As soon as the house lights came up, people scurried from their seats before the applause finished. Louise’s interior was as dramatic and impressive as her tuxedoed workforce. Table-sized, clear, acoustical panels shimmered overhead, hovering at various heights like a migrating flock of automobile windshields.

“San Francisco audiences are too generous,” Alexander criticized. “They clap for anything.”

“You didn’t care for the Adams?” said the wizened old man on Alexander’s right.

“Actually it was better than I had anticipated, but no; I’m here for the next piece.”

“Ah yes, the Tchaikovsky B flat minor. One of his better efforts, I’d say. So much preferable to his ballet music.”

Michael tacitly agreed with that verdict. He had rehearsed and danced enough Nut Cracker performances in his career to be able to hum every note.

“Come on Michael, it’s too warm to linger up here.” Alexander peeled off a glove and swept a naked hand across the horizon. “Let’s have a drink downstairs and steal a look at the beautiful people.”

Michael scanned the crowd below. A twinkling, pale yellow cloud exited the fourth row and weaved up the center aisle.

“Actually, I’m quite content here. Wouldn’t you rather wait for the drink until after we hear the concerto? You’re better off with a clear head in order to make comparisons between yourself and Yundi.”

“Nonsense. If Mr. Li plays it better than me, I’d rather be drunk. Besides, I want to wash ‘Earbix’ out of my ears.” He all but stomped his feet at the gallery door.

Michael’s suggested that they return to the upper foyer bar and Alexander gave a terse grunt. “I’ll buy this round Michael,” he said as he led the charge downstairs into the boisterous, self-infatuated crowd.

Decibels rose as the men descended. Like wading into ocean waves, Michael dreaded the pull of the undertow with every step. He circled Alexander in an attempt to keep his friend’s back turned to Jessica and her intimidating, burly companion.

“What did you think of Leslie’s and Jason’s playing?” Michael said to Alexander’s darting head.

“How could anyone hear a faulty note in that cacophony? Now when it comes to the concerto I’ll be able to distinguish every mistake. I almost have it memorized.”

“Alex Slovin!”

They turned to a casually dressed young man, one of Alexander’s piano students.

Jessica also turned at the sound of his name. When their eyes met, her perfect lips parted as if in prayer or terror. She dropped her glass of bubbly and crumpled against her cousin.

Alexander clamped his lips tight, lifted his chin and with a decisive inhalation, strode through the multitude and burst through the double doors.

It was then that there began to flow from Nikolay Grigoryevich’s (Rubinstein’s) mouth a stream of words, quiet at first, but subsequently assuming more and more the tone of Jove the Thunderer. It appeared that my concerto was worthless, that it was unplayable, that passages were trite, awkward, and so clumsy that it was impossible to put them right, that as composition it was bad and tawdry, that I had filched this bit from here and that bit from there, that there were only two or three pages that could be retained, and that the rest would have to be scrapped or completely revised. “Take this, for instance – whatever is it?” (at this he plays the passage concerned, caricaturing it). ‘And this? Is this really possible?’ – and so on, and so on. I can’t convey to you the most significant thing- that is, the TONE in which all this was delivered. In a word, any outsider who chanced to come into the room might have thought that I was an imbecile, an untalented scribbler who understood nothing, who had come to an eminent musician to pester him with his rubbish.

~ Pyotr Tchaikovsky

By the time Michael caught up with Alexander, the pianist was a full block down Van Ness Avenue. The drone of bumper to bumper traffic accompanied the thump of Alexander’s gloves as he swatted his pockets.

“Damn! What a waste of an evening,” he mumbled. An unlit cigarette wagged from the corner of his mouth. “What a waste of years! I wonder if she ever cared for me. Did you see that jock she was with? Where the hell is my lighter?”

A grimy hand cleaved the air between the two men and Michael reeled from the reek of urine as a derelict flicked flame to Alexander’s forgotten cigarette. Alexander passed the man a dollar without slowing his pace.

Michael had not yet heard the details surrounding the couple’s split, and clearly this was not the time to inquire. Nor would it be helpful to remind his friend of the many celebratory tales of romance with which Alexander had regaled him every week during training. If Michael played the oboe or the violin he might have been able to penetrate Alexander’s gloom. The plaintive melodies of Tchaikovsky would resonate well now. Words however, were only so much noise.

Alexander raged. It was now clear to him that his engagement was a sham, that Jessica was a witch who’d feigned her orgasms during their entire

two-year romance, that his talents in bed, at the keyboard, and as a provider were laughable, that he was in short, a failure, destined to grovel for love and sustenance in some no-talent, lounge act.

Love lost as though it had never happened.

Of the four qualities of breath: depth, volume, velocity and ease; depth is the most recited as a barometer of love. Velocity however, is more useful. Passion can flare over one candlelit dinner; cuddle a couple in their first waltz around a dance floor, or walk the steady, quieter pace of a nurtured friendship. Affection flourishes best when its inconsistent tempo is embraced.

“Alexander, I know this is a bleak time for you. It must seem as though Heaven has conspired against you. Please believe that this shadow will eventually pass.” As if on cue the crescent moon flooded the sidewalk blue. “Look Alexander, I thought it was going to rain but the stars are shining for us!”

“I will never marry.”

“Ah, you say that now, but you’re very young, my friend. With your looks and wit you no doubt have many great affairs ahead of you.”

Unfortunately for Alexander, Michael’s optimistic assurance would prove false. Alexander would suffer a series of short, unsatisfying entanglements before eventually wedding, unhappily and at great expense, a shrew of a social climber who would harangue him for eight years before agreeing to a very acrimonious and public divorce. His legacy would include music but not progeny. Never again would Alexander Slovin know the comfort and intimacy that he had found with Jessica.

I left the room silently and went upstairs. I could say nothing because of my agitation and anger. Rubinstein soon appeared and, noticing my distraught state, drew me aside into a distant room. There he told me again that my concerto was impossible, and after pointing out to me a lot of places that required radical change, he said that if by such-and-such a date I would revise the concerto in accordance with his demands, then he would bestow upon me the honor of playing my piece in a concert of his. “I won’t change a single note,” I replied, “and I’ll publish it just as it is now!” And so I did!

~ Pyotr Tchaikovsky

The Van Ness subway station is as gray inside as Louise’s concrete exterior, and with similar vulgarity; both light their patrons from above. In the train station, stairs and escalators gyroscope shadows onto reflecting floor tiles of still more gray. This is understandable and easy to clean. Subways cater to a more democratic crowd than concert halls. The Van Ness station is Louise’s ugly step-sister.

The northwest corner of the station is ringed by a small encampment of the homeless. Opera, ballet, symphony and civic center visitors emerge not to greetings of “Welcome to our fair city” but to calls for spare change. Michael and Alexander ignored outstretched arms and rattling paper cups on their cheerless descent to the trains.

Clattering quarters vended by the change machine amplified the silence between the men. Michael knew his friend was too proud to apologize for his disposition, but Alexander was not beyond ceremony. He acknowledged the finality of the moment.

"I'm sorry about abandoning the concert, Michael. You can probably still catch most of the performance."

"Thank you Alex, but I really don't mind. I'd rather see and hear you play the concerto one day." The men embraced before diverging to opposite sides of the platform. Alexander waved a black gloved hand from the inbound tracks.

"Alex, write when you find work!" Michael's joke brought smiles to the other waiting passengers.

"I'll call you in a couple of days," Alexander shouted as the silver cylinder of a train hissed into the station behind him. "Maybe we can get together next weekend."

"Sure! I'll email you."

Words...

The two men would not see each other again for twelve years. That's when Michael would recognize a black gloved hand reaching for a suitcase orbiting a luggage carousel at O'Hare International Airport. Alexander would be checking in for a concert with the Chicago Symphony.

"No, my friend, not the Tchaikovsky; I'm playing the Chopin Second."

Michael would be in the windy city to promote his latest spiritual, weight loss book, "Fit Attitude", on Oprah. The two men wouldn't even have time to share lunch.

Such is the nature of time versus friendship. In the face of colliding commitments, new priorities win; the best of intentions are toothless.

Love lost as though it had never happened.

The first two traits of breath: depth and volume; are oft times contrasted as social choices: "Would you rather have a few close friends or many superficial acquaintances?" It is an artificial contest, commitment versus convenience, as though one's loyalty had limits, as though one's duty could be strained. It was a choice imposed on Alexander by Jessica: "Music or me?" A declaration echoed by Louise: "Art or money?" A resolution faced by anyone with talent: "Self-respect or conformity?"

Michael took a deep, full, slow, relaxed breath as he boarded the outbound train and whispered his farewell as a sigh.