

**ALLEGRO CON FUOCO by Beatrice Venezi**  
**FALLING FOR CLASSICAL MUSIC**

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1

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Our ears don't have lids that can instinctively close against the words uttered.

JAVIER MARÍAS, *A Heart So White*

Hold on a second. Listen. You're maybe walking on a busy street, the roadways jammed with cars. The sidewalk is crowded. And yet you can hear something. Neither the car horns nor the drill from some apartment. I know it is difficult with all the chattering but try to lend an ear. From the open doors of a shop comes a motif you think you know. Maybe it's Vivaldi, Mozart or that other famous piece you never remember the name. Or maybe you're at home, in the kitchen, and the music comes from the TV in the living room. Or again, you're sitting with crossed legs in the waiting room of your dentist, carelessly browsing a magazine. After you noticed the music, you're firstly tempted to put back the earpods hanging from your smartphone, or go back to cook, to browse the magazine, to sink into your thoughts.

Just this time try to resist. Lend an ear. You know very well that melody, you can even try to hum it. It's one of those songs you can't remember the first time you heard it, nor who talked about it with you or even if you ever seriously listened it fully. And yet you know it, like it was in your DNA. Like it was an innate knowledge. You move close to the shop (or to the television, or the waiting room speaker). Why didn't you think of this before. The strings tension exploding in a fortissimo di gioia/gioioso and then the unexpected voices fitting together with the symphony. You know that pace well: maybe was your teacher or the middle school professor or just an

advertising. But you know it well. Now stay. Your head slightly forward, your ear trying to ignore all the background noise and to get back to the melody flow. Yes, everybody is looking at you. You look quite funny, standing that way, but let it be. They're not listening to what you are. The strings go on strongly, in a crescendo that leaves you breathless.

You're now focused on the music but maybe you're starting to listen something. While the melody grows epically you start feeling something that vibrate inside you and for a second an unshakeable faith in the humanity that surrounds you shakes your heart and you're ready for some heroic act. Is that emotions, so strong, so pure, the great quality of this symphony. A compelling and captivating emotion.

Classical music is full of those emotions and also of thousand of other shade. Anger, passion, fury, melancholy, despair, ... Every composer tried to write on his musical staff the infinite shifting of the human soul to the smallest sensation. And all those rousing emotions, and yet within everyone's reach, made me fall in love years ago and make me fall again an again every day.

The persisting noise of a car horn makes you jump, the hoven timer rings in the kitchen, the dentist assistant calls your name. The symphony it's over, from the speakers comes a rap song. You look around and everything looks different.

What are we talking about when we talk about classical music? It's the music from a very distant time? It's the music of violins and pianos? Let's start from here. When I say "classical music" I mean a period of time and also a specific object.

A period of time: it's all the cultivated music wrote before the birth of *pop music*, or *light music*, but in the specific historic and critic terminology means the music wrote in the "musical classicism" period, the one hundred or so years between 1750 and 1850. A specific object: it's the music that mainly uses the european or occidental tonal harmony and it's based on a written notation (tonal harmony? Notation? Don't worry, we'll soon get to it).

This two set are not perfectly overlapping nor strict: many consider classical music lot of music wrote after 1850, many consider classical also the dodecaphonic music, or atonal, or serial (dodecaphonic? Atonal? Serial? We'll get to them too, you'll see).

It's especially difficult to define what really is the music called for convenience sake *classical music*. Someone calls it "cultivated music", some others "serious music" or "academic music" but I believe that none of those definitions is the right one because it always leads to exclude a huge parts of public, at best; at worst it leads to offend it and not even covertly. A waltz is classical music? A Chopin waltz? A Raoul Casadei and his ballroom Orchestra waltz?

And the poor modern composers, guilty only of not being born during Mozart and Beethoven age nor to wear a gorget for a night out, have to bear the label of "contemporary classical music"

which it's clearly a contradiction.

To me it's better to widen the definition. Like Alex Ross does with great intelligence in *Listen To This*: □ Music is simply what composers create, whatever it is, a long sequence of written works to which many traditional performances ended up to link. It encloses the high and low, the empire and the underground, dance and prayer, silence and noise □.

Also because -even if we never thought about it- at least until mid nineteenth century what we call classical music was just "the music". All the music. There was simply no other options. And its way to be transmitted and spread were quite pop: it wasn't considered like something meant only for a bourgeois and elderly public but also for dressmakers and workers, soldiers and mothers. And there was no obsession with the past, like today. Without any system of technical reproduction, the only way to listen to it was to go at the theatre and there the composers reused old melodic material to mix it and renovate it until they get something new. The same way today there's a new song every day.

Each kind of music has been contemporary, the same way each (good) kind of music will end up being classic. Think about jazz, so shocking and modern at the beginning and today so vintage and refined. And think about what you define "classic rock": that's history, baby.

I'd rather stop labelling music, with a classifying urge that doesn't help us to understand but ends up only making all an easier marketable product and i'd like to talk about "good" or "bad" music, well or poorly played (as well as I'd like only to talk about good or bad maestros and not if they are male or female, but this is another story). Music itself shouldn't even see those labels: let's think about Ferruccio Busoni, Tuscan composer grown up in german countries where he studied. Busoni was always considered too much german to be italian and too much italian to be german, for the style of his compositions (he mixed harmony and counterpoints from german tradition and an extraordinary lyricism with italian origins) and also for his language: in some letters he wrote to his wife he complained of not literally knowing anymore which was his true language, his identity. But truth is that his music has thousands different echoes: italians and germans, but also references from music of cabaret that he frequently listened in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century. Then Busoni can hardly be reduced to a simple label, almost unsellable. That means, to put it simply, forgettable.

But I love Busoni's compositions. I suggest his *Turandot* (did you think that only Puccini's existed? Surprise!)

And I'd like also simply talk about the music that gives an aesthetic, intellectual, emotional pleasure because able to touch, inflame and push you to dig deeper to reach energy reserves we thought were lost.

This is the classical music that has been my teacher, in a never ending path. This classical music

can teach to wait, to respect roles and hierarchies. Can teach that silences exist to give a voice the time to be ready, to take a run-up and make a beautiful solo. Can also teach that a note can be played in several, different ways and every time the meaning changes but will never be incomprehensible. Only with discipline, listening to your sound and the sound that others give us, harmony can be reached, the perfect communion of the concert.

Concerto has a double meaning in Italian: accord, agreement (“di concerto” is a saying we still use today) or a situation where music is played and listened.

It comes from Latin *concertus*, “consonance, voices accord”, that includes also the *consertus* meaning “intertwined”. Only when two or more voices intertwine can be reached a harmony, an accord, a dialog. Music has been the first way men expressed their emotions to each others; the first way to talk with God.

In ancient China music was the only form of spirituality allowed. For Sufis, the mystic Islamic branch disciples, is the only purification way to reach God □with a hearth as white as snow□. In the Christian liturgy music amplifies the word: it can arrive where man never will. In my memories there’s always the sound, the music. Maybe I can’t exactly say which notes, the first time I listened to a performance, but I can remember their resonance on me. It’s a physical sensation in the first place: a flow in my ears, the flow of my blood, a pressure on my skin. Something that stays once the music ends. And maybe you can’t even exactly remember the sound of the free wind in a storm or the way a pipe organ sounds in a dark church. And yet we do it. Those things talk to us and accompany all our life. I remember the sound of the gate opening when a loved one was coming home, the footsteps on the stairs while waiting the door to finally open. That’s what music does, it makes immortal that sound.

They say, one day, the emperor Frederick II decided to carry out an experiment. He was a truly great emperor, able to win a Crusade only with diplomacy (even with a small effort, except for the fact that negotiations took place in St. John of Acre in the desert) and to make his court the peaceful meeting place of at least five cultures. This time he was about to discover something greater than him. Frederick was an excellent scholar, not only of falconry but also of literature and philosophy, and at a certain point he also decided to find the origins of the language, the primordial one: he wanted to know the first one ever spoken. It should have been the one eventually spoken by any human being without any conditioning. He chose some children and told their nurse to breastfeed and take care of them without any endearments or words, sounds or lullaby of any kind. Frederick believed the children would end up speaking Hebrew, the language believed to be the first one, or at least their parents’ language (as if the language were part of the genetic makeup, like the color of the hair or the eyes). The truth was that the children stayed completely mute. None of them let out a sound. And, without any cuddle or contacts, they

eventually died: no one can survive without love, compassion or dialogue with other human beings. If the sight gives us the sense of ourselves, the hearing gives us the others.

And to me it gave me the classical music. I fell in love, suddenly and without further conditioning. I recognised it in a moment of pure and terrifying beauty.

The classical music world isn't easy. Historically even harder for women. When I chose this path, it was full of obstacles for me but I luckily found immediately two examples: Carlos Kleiber and Leonard Bernstein. The first is elegance, moderation and refinement. Everything in his conducting is flowing, natural, immediate. Kleiber was able to outline the music, to paint it making it immediately understandable and apparent to everyone, the players and the listeners. The quintessence of conducting. Leonard Bernstein, on the other hand, is simply the measure of everything. I believe that his merit is to understand before everyone the relevance of divulgation. Music isn't a tower, a closed fence, but a castle with a dragon watching the entrance to and to be driven away. A winter garden that has to bloom again. Bernstein brilliantly realized the huge potential of television and he used it for the first time in his shows, like for example *Young People's Concerts*. The public of those shows, taking place in theatres but then broadcast also by radio and television, could fill at the same time ten, hundred of concert halls besides the public in the actual hall! And listen the maestro talking calmly about music with simplicity and immediacy is just fascinating. In his serial concerts he was able to explain who Gustav Mahler was or to talk about musical impressionism; he could tell the history of the strangest musical instruments as well as quizzing his listeners to test their "musicality" level. Kleiber and Bernstein, even if different, had something in common that make them to me so close and dear: they know how to move lightly in the music. And I don't mean superficiality but, as Clavino says, lightness is gliding from on high, without burdens on your heart. A way to consider playing music firstly as an amusement, a passion, a pleasure. And not because music is a light thing (the opposite, absolutely) but because we too often forget that music is also a way of happiness, of personal improvement. A chance to take a challenge and create. I tell you once again: music is beautiful and we must to enjoy beauty.

And yet, I know, it isn't easy. Many told me they began to study music, maybe at school, and then stopped, maybe scared by a dull teacher. Music turned off in those people and who knows if it ever reawaken. With recorder and endless repetitions, the study of music had many desertions. I'm writing this book for those people.

It occurred also to me. I was at the college of music studying piano but day by day it was becoming more arid, a more and more mechanical repetition that couldn't express myself. Music was becoming the technical copy of a sound. In english, as in french *jouer* and in russian 'igrat to

*play* has a double meaning: to have fun and to produce music. And at the time of the college of music I ended up forgetting the fun, the amusement of music.

But to love and respect music doesn't mean only to become the perfect performer, it means to put in it, our emotions and all we want to express. I got this dimension, fundamental, only when I started to conduct. And suddenly what was black and white became colorful. I'm not a hater of the technique now and I don't prefer rough performances, even heard, or such banalities. To have the chance to perform with a technically perfect orchestra is great, of course, but is not the end. If you think it is, I believe that music can lose a very important part. If you approach it with a light soul, a sort of magic happens. There's me, on the stage, and all the musicians in front of me and then there's you, behind in the dark. Don't think I can't hear you: in that moment I'm your point of contact, where your energies and what happens on stage get in touch. In front and behind me there are live people and I have to be malleable, willing and yet attentive and sensitive like an antenna able to receive and retransmit, unified, our feelings. That is only one thing: like being part of a unique great dream, in the bubble of an enchantment that we all create. Me and my performance, the musicians and the concert, you and your attention and reactions. And then it doesn't matter if you clap in the wrong moment, because maybe you don't exactly know the piece or the norms of this kind of style. What matters is that this music arrived to you. Gliding from on high, with light heart and fast fingers, on the instruments, on the arrangements, is my wish for all us the music professionals. And only if the orchestra is united in this feeling, you also feel the same lightness. So the music will end to be a mechanical repetition means and become means of joy, fun and maybe also of a pinch of madness. Shall we discover it together?

Today music is the place for cliché, and it seems to decline faster and in a more decisive way than other arts. I asked myself for a long time what is the answer to this progressive and apparently irreversible detachment between music and public. I asked myself why the love at first sight I so easily felt is so difficult to repeat, even before a famous contemporary pianist had fun putting incredible clichés in classical music (such as Beethoven without rhythm). I believe the solution is complex and many-sided: music has different specific features, very different from those of other arts. First of all, music is made of conflicts: between rational and irrational, sound and silence, matter and dematerialisation, written object and individual performance, volatile and variable. Music indeed isn't tangible, you can see it, touch it or perceive it only with your ears and, in our society deeply related to vision, something like that can easily be reduced to a boring nothing. It isn't fixed and static, but fluid as water: each performance is different, depending on every soloist interpretation and on every maestro. Besides improvisation play a huge part in music history and long before jazz and rock guitar solo: in Baroque time, many parts were programmatically left to

solo improvisation, like the basso continuo, cadences or embellishments, and until the Romanticism variation and improvisation on a given melody were a common practice for masters like Liszt and Paganini. In the end, music isn't semantic and that forces us to make a mental effort to grasp it or comprehend it: we can't understand it all and not all together. Moreover music has a diachronic development: to enjoy it means to use a great part of our time, in a society with the attention level of a red fish: a red fish can stay focused for only nine seconds, while post-technological men... eight.

In the increasingly hectic contemporary world, is quite easier to visit a museum than going to a concert, especially if it's classical music. In a museum, if we are not interested in a painting we can skip it or take a break. If we don't listen a part of a concert or a symphony, but also of a madrigal or a motet, we could lose the full comprehension of the entire opera. Music is not always immediately comprehensible, especially if we don't have many means to approach it and it needs an initial effort of participative listening. This is common also to some abstract art, not figurative, where the absence of formal codes put the observer in trouble. Moreover: because if like the abstract art asks us to completely expose ourselves, its "materiality" pervade the space, making impossible to cut it out. Ears don't have eyelids: you can at least shut them. Compared to a concert, also reading a novel is easier, because we know its code and its narrative flow gets us moving forward with no great efforts, with no need of a particularly active attention. Music, with no visual, but completely formal codes, remains more unclear: and to label it "incomprehensible" or "boring" is quite immediate.

Classical music, everybody knows it, is for elderly people. For old dressed up men with white mustaches and furred ladies at the opening night of La Scala, while it's freezing outside. Young people consider it like a distant thing, without importance, dull and useless, the most boring thing. Sad. Without rhythm (indeed). Surely a certain academic attitude contributed to this refuse, as well as the coldness of some musicians or orchestra leaders that we consider the embodiment of the classical music itself. And yet it is so joyful, such a colorful explosion. Once a friend of mine told me he loved to listen Bach, but he felt in fault because he was afraid of not understanding his music. What he meant is that he didn't know how to decipher his codes, why Bach used a solution instead of another in a certain point and why not elsewhere. He didn't understand that architecture and its entire world, he felt cut off, rejected. But this music gave him an aesthetic emotion and, even if he couldn't rationalise it, that emotion wasn't less true. On a primordial level, maybe unconscious, he understood that music, otherwise he wouldn't have listened it, and the emotion he felt was authentic. This is a small and banal demonstration that the message of classical music is far from being extinct: why we refuse to give it a name? It's a place of fascination and captivation. It's impossible to give a clear meaning to a note or an entire

composition and that can be confusing and frightening. But this is the magic of classical music: it's exciting for the imagination. It challenges you and forces you to not give up. It talks about something we haven't experienced, as individuals, but we also keep feeling inside us, if we carefully listen.

Let's raise an antenna to the unknown and listen. It uses words and feelings that we know. It's possible to talk about and create classic music today: and before we learn how to read it and the musical theory and practice, we have to simply listen what music never stopped to say. Moreover: be ready to embrace the magnificence, the wonder, the bolt of lightning and face it like children. Music is seduction and elegance that don't age.

In her memoir, *Sound*, writer and journalist Bella Bathurst tells exactly what happened to me in my first time with music: □I was sitting there, shattered by sound: those few Schubert bars changed everything. Music flew inside me like a great shining river falling on every atom of my being. [...] It was like someone entered my engine room, found my inner switchboard, pushed a lever activating both switches - *bang, bang!*- and now all the lights lit up again □.

*To listen or not to listen, that is the question*

Let's go back. This time you are in the shop. The clothes piled up on a stool in the fitting room. The rediffusion plays a catchy piece you didn't notice until now. You'd bet there was no music at all. The truth is that we don't listen to this music. This kind of musical event is called *Muzak* and it's a background music in working, consumer or amusement places, especially to deaden other noises: those sounds made by the industrial society, ruining ears and mind. This sound aims to hit our senses, to be literally *heard* and not *listened*. And even less to be *understood*, that means to give messages besides the simple melody, to transmit a transcendence or a spirituality. This proves the huge power of music on our brain, on our mood and our behaviour but on the other hand this also explains why we completely stopped to listen. We want to protect ourselves from this sugary musical mush, ready-made and monotonous infesting like a parasite our brains. So we cut it all out. Maybe you were right, music (the Music) isn't part of our life.

We immediately notice a new billboard on the building next to our. It's harder that we listen to what really surrounds us. We are mute like Frederick II's children. We can't hear at any level, mainly the classical one where maybe the listening disappeared more clearly. Contemporary light music on one hand, and the academicism on the other hand are guilty and today classical music is even more distant from its public: an abyss difficult to close up. I believe that a simple sound education before than a musical one, will save us. Also good music is all around.

Ambient music, for example, it's so easy to confuse with the sugary mush we said before but it



had great fathers. One of them is Erik Satie, impressionist composer and visionary, collector and compulsive notes and great jokes writer (he wrote to a reviewer: "Sir, you're just a butt, but a music-less butt"). He is one of the most loved composer in contemporary movies and not only: his *Gnossiennes* and *Gymnopédies* are everywhere, from *Moulin Rouge!* to *Chocolat*, from *Mr Nobody* to *Hugo Cabret*, and don't forget Lana del Rey. Satie was expelled from a college of music because he was "untalented", and yet he became one of the most eccentric and ironic composer of the nineteenth century (I overstate and I say of the history of music). He lived in a two rooms apartment: one inhabited while the other was "my closet", filled only with... umbrellas. He wrote the shortest piece of the history and also the longest, one hundred and forty four notes repeated 840 times for a total length of twenty hour. Title: *Vexations* (nuisances). He also provoked the official academicism with "musique d'ameublement" (furniture, tapestry music). He didn't mean the musical jam we get used to with the call centers. His ambient music, that evolved in other music trend (such as concrete music of Pierre Schaffaer and John Cage to Brian Eno), in his words "is a music that doesn't need to be listened" and also a way to free the sound. It is to create an emotion, a mood, to prepare for a behaviour: that doesn't mean decrease the sound but to increase it. They don't make us not listening but instead they let us do it on many different levels.

Even if, we must admit it, the provocative and desecrating Satie does all he can to confuse us. On the score of the first performance of this music was written "We encourage you to ignore it and to behave like it doesn't exist at all during the intervals". Obviously the public didn't follow the hint, because used to strict theatrical shows. They sat still, religiously listening. Satie wanted to free the sounds from the transcendence aura that classical music and its performances brought out and repeated, every time closing up always more, every time becoming more exclusive, for the public and in the expression. The point was to give the sound back its importance as sound itself, pure sound, to free the sound from the artistic need. With his compositions, just sounds repeating, and not the easy melody of contemporary Muzak, he showed the simplistic use of music and at the same time he reflected upon: a dadaist disrespectful process like Duchamp's. And always smiling. Who better than him can define it: "The musique d'ameublement it's basically an industrial product. The routine want us to play music where it doesn't belong. They play opera fantasies, waltz and alike music, composed for other occasions. We want to create overtly "utilitarian" music. Art is another thing. The musique d'ameublement creates a vibration, without any other purpose. It has the same function of light, heat and comfort in every form. Covers for marches, polkas, tangos, gavotte and so on. Ask for musique d'ameublement. No more meetings, gatherings and alike without musique d'ameublement for notaries, banks and so on. Musique d'ameublement has no identity. No more wedding without musique d'ameublement. Leave

houses without musique d'ameublement. Who never listened to musique d'ameublement doesn't know happiness. Don't go to bed without a musique d'ameublement piece, if you want to sleep soundly□. Aren't you curious now of what is a "non-forniture" music, the music ridiculed and for that strongly loved by Satie?

And yet it's like we lost the keys for a treasure once live and accessible for years; it's like music and listeners had suddenly started to speak different languages. Maybe this music wasn't anymore the answer to certain needs; maybe it addressed to people unable to understand; maybe its aura frightened who tried to shyly approach it; maybe we stopped to teach it or even only to try to listen it. We preferred simpler sounds, that don't request competence, effort. But we also gave up emotion.

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