

The Schubert Band-Aid

Claire Oppert

PROLOGUE - Madam Kessler

Andante from Trio Op. 100 by Franz Schubert

(Exposition)

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The leaves of the large oak tree in front of the windows of the housing facility for the elderly and dependent quiver in the light and brightness of spring.

Reception area. The floor housing the 21 mentally-ill residents is secured. It's even called, "The Secure Unit." The elevator has a code. I always forget it when I walk up to it. Funny, isn't it?

In a corner, a woman is screaming and thrashing about. Two nurses are frantically trying to hold her down to keep her from falling out of her wheelchair all while fending off her blows. They absolutely must re-bandage the patient's arm wound, which is clearly infected.

Her face is hidden behind the nurses' furrowed brows and tense movements. But

when she stops screaming, she tries to bite them. I don't know what moves me to stop in front of her. I don't say a word. I sit down and play the theme of the slow movement of Schubert's Trio No. 2 on my cello.

Hardly three seconds go by, maybe two bars, and her arm suddenly relaxes. The screaming stops. Quiet and calm return to the room. I finally see her face, a surprised look on her face and a hint of a smile on her lips.

It's so effective that I don't play much that day. It's more than a surprise, it's a miracle. The nurses all smile. One of them even laughs and says, "You absolutely must come back for the Schubert treatment."

The turn of phrase captures it perfectly. And thus the expression is born that will coin the project to come.

As I walk away, I know that something big just happened. For the first time ever, I am confronted with the self-evident and radical relief of a patient in pain. One year later, as I'm finalizing the "Schubert Treatment" protocol for over a hundred end-of-life patients in the "Mentally-Ill Section" of the palliative care unit at the Sainte-Périne Hospital in Paris, the head doctor eloquently states, "10 minutes of Schubert = 5 mg of Oxynorm."

There will be plenty of Schubert, but also Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninoff; songs by Piaf, Cloclo, Adamo, Johnny Hallyday; Jewish, Arabic, African,

Breton, and Irish tunes; waltzes and tangos; Puccini and Verdi; jazz, rock, pop, and even metal! That same week, I return on two occasions to play while they change the patient's bandage. And each time, the results are the same. There is no other way to calm her down. Madam Kessler sits up straight in her wheelchair and lets the nurses do their job while I play the theme of the slow movement of Schubert's Trio No. 2 over and over again for her. The light emanating from her face is so intense that it illuminates the entire room, the nurses, and me. Even the oak tree with its wide branches that watches us from outside gets his share. At least that's the impression I get when I say goodbye to him as I leave.

My story today aims to capture as accurately as possible my experiences over more than twenty years and to convey the mysterious paths that music takes when it touches the hearts of the people we call severely autistic, retirement facility "residents," mentally-ill patients, and people in pain or near the end of life.

Putting aside logic, my story attempts to bear witness to that sovereign and whole place deep inside each one of us that music sometimes touches and brings back to life.

It's a happy story.

The musician in me wasn't motivated to care for or help these people by any kind of moral impulse. It was natural, instinctive, almost primal.

Music, in the curved form of a cello that has become my life, rises up like a rampart wall before absurdity, sickness, and death, reaching out to “what’s underneath.” That “underground” place that still resists. Bedside music. A feeling of trust like a refreshing breeze.

Awareness of this life’s fragile grace. Thankfulness that flows and spreads out into multiple streams.

1- Paul

Prelude to Cello Suite No. 1 by Johann Sebastian Bach

Ut major. Cheerful and warlikeⁱ

March 1997. Saint Denis, Adam Shelton Center, Medical and Educational Institution for Young Autistics.

His nose pressed up against the glass that separates the room I’m in from the hallway, Howard watches me play the cello like every Friday. I’m playing in front of Paul, for Paul.

Paul is 15 years old. He’s autistic. He’s a surprisingly beautiful boy with incredibly blue eyes. Paul has never spoken. Sitting cross-legged, he faces the wall and moves back and forth in jerky motions, his back stiff and his eyes fixed on a far-off point in space. Sometimes he throws his head back, laughs loudly, and suddenly stops. His face is

ravaged by distress. Paul spits, pees on the floor in front of me, and laughs again even more loudly. I have never once made eye contact with him. His eyes seem to look through me without ever seeing me. It's very strange.

As he moves back and forth, he makes a continuous sound like a motor with a few hoarse syllables. It's hard to describe... Somewhere between laughter and sobs.

In the back of the room, I start to sing, moan, and sway like him. It's the only thing I can think to do in that moment. My cello hasn't sung yet, but I feel its old wood against my chest and know that it is one with me. Suddenly Paul comes over. He scoots very quickly on his backside. He's right next to me now and spits into the air with astonishing precision. He carefully wipes his spit all over his hands and face. The tips of his wet fingers brush against my cello for a split second. Then he sniffs the instrument's fingerboard. He wants me to smell it too. Just inches away from me, he moans impatiently and starts swaying more intensely. He grabs onto my hair tightly. As though it wasn't me. As though I was no longer there. He finally lets go. I didn't fight back and didn't say anything. He takes his head in his hands and smacks his cheeks forcefully, one after the other. As though it wasn't him. As though he was no longer there. Now he's crying.

I start to play the Prelude to the first Suite. As soon as the cello resonates, Paul freezes and stops crying. He jumps to his feet like a spring. He runs over to a long plastic tube in a corner of the room and looks through it in my direction. It's as though he's finally seeing me. That's my first thought. But maybe he's looking at Johann Sebastian

Bach's Prelude? The music that flows toward him and through him? I don't know. I didn't even know that such questions existed. But one thing is certain: I'm not afraid and I'm happy here with him. As he is with me.

In the hallway, the glass has fogged up from the breath of the children playing on the wall. His nose pressed up and deformed by the glass, Howard's eyes are full of tears. What does he see that I don't? Howard Buten is the clinical psychologist for extreme cases, the most severe cases that are refused by all other institutions.

"They always have something to teach us, even when what they do frightens or alarms us."

Now Paul is smiling. It's the glow of a smile to be precise, like a light shadow that subtly illuminates the storm on his forehead and his blue eyes. He puts down the tube and sits down next to me again. He is calm. He places his right cheek and his hands flat against the cello. I think that he's singing.

A little girl in my family's apartment in Paris, I call out to my mother through my bedroom wall before going to sleep, "Mommy... I'm so happy!" I say it over and over again. I feel lighthearted, it floods my very being.

Joy moves through the wall separating my bedroom from that of my beloved

mother. That feeling has never changed. I still feel that same awe.

A feeling of trust. A kind of sparkling sensation from the dawn of time. Trust and gratitude before the splendor around me, like a foundation for life.

***Prelude to Cello Suite No. 5 by Johann Sebastian Bach C
minor. Dark, sad.***

A terrible crash resounds, like a cannonball being fired during World War I. The cello has exploded. Its body has been smashed by a sharp and powerful blow. Never in my life, not even in my worst nightmares, could I have imagined a cello breaking against my chest. It's an indescribable feeling. Unthinkably violent. I stop at once, my heart racing, stunned by what's just happened.

"Paul, Paul, what have you done? Paul... Paul..." A shiver crawls up my spine. My heart feels raw. I feel very alone all of a sudden. The cello is broken, but once I get over the initial shock, I assimilate this information in the space of a second.

"It's okay, Paul. I'll keep playing." I can, in fact, keep playing. The left-hand side of the cello has been destroyed, but the bridge and strings haven't been affected. The cello isn't even out of tune.

I tremble and change registers. *Solveig's Song* by Edvard Grieg.

During all of our future sessions, Paul sits cross-legged and touches the wounded instrument's open fracture with his hand. Like a potentially dangerous and sensuous caress, over and over again.

Every so often, he looks at me furtively out of the corner of his eye. After this episode, Howard forbids me from reading anything about autism. He makes me swear that I won't look up anything whatsoever.

"Swear it. Swear it to me right now." I swear it as my heart beats wildly in my chest.

"What you and your cello are doing here is working wonders." In the six years that I spent with him and his family of autistic children, I never once opened a book or read an article on autism.

One spring day, exactly four months after my first session with Paul, I attempt to play Bach's Prelude to Cello Suite No. 5 for him again, which I instinctively hadn't played since the incident, out of fear for myself and for him. And his reaction continues to surprise me to this very day.

After three bars, another cannonball shatters the instrument with terrible violence. The yawning gap has widened now, but the strings are still intact. A mere millimeter of wood holds the bridge in place. The cello is mortally wounded.

For the first time ever, Paul stares into my eyes. Neither one of us moves. His eyes

drill into me, fascinated. We look at one another and lock eyes.

“You have to look at them straight in the eye, but without any judgment and in such a welcoming and open way that they can’t resist.”

Paul never punched the cello again. I never played Bach’s Prelude to Cello Suite No. 5 for him again. And we continued to see each other for several years. During each session, he would always delight in caressing the cello’s gaping hole with his wet fingers while looking straight at me.

Yes, *there’s somebody in there*, without a doubt, Howard.

I could have become a doctor like my brother, my father, and my grandfather. That was my first dream.

My father is what you might call a doctor-artist. When he visits one of his patients, he’s sometimes five or seven hours late, maybe even two days.

He has a very “unique” relationship to time. “Always late, but always there,” Jean Maheu would say. He rings at midnight, comes into the apartment, and asks for some soup as he hasn’t had dinner yet. Later, he sits down at the piano and plays Chopin’s Nocturne, often No. 2 in C-sharp minor. Then he closes the piano and puts on his hat (which is always too small) to take his leave.

“Doctor,” says the patient, “you haven’t even examined me.” And he replies, as though it

were the most natural thing in the world, “You’re doing much better. I’ll see you next week.”

“The doctor that often sits down at the piano... For music is a call to life.” My father, the doctor. An elusive man and inimitable artist. He travels throughout France and beyond to see his patients. He’s expected everywhere and loved by all. He doesn’t always take money, but happily accepts homemade rhubarb compotes, Antilles rice pudding, and vegetable soup. “A tireless doctor, attentive to the point of distraction. A genius blessed with an unfailing intuition for diagnosis. Impeccably ethical and authentically and naturally selfless.”

He’s the doctor for many Parisian theaters, including the Odéon and the Madeleine, and often takes me with him to shows. And yet, I don’t think that I ever saw the first act of a single play as we are always late. We enter the theater and disturb an entire row of people, “Sorry, excuse us...” People stand up to let us by. Later, when I perform on stage, I see the lights darken and his seat is still empty. Then suddenly, in the middle of a sonata movement, spectators stand up one by one and I see his aquiline silhouette in the darkness. “Sorry, excuse me...” He makes his way to his seat, creating carefree waves through the atrium. He doesn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest. During intermission, he walks up to perfect strangers and asks, “What did you think?” And without waiting for them to reply, he tells them with almost childlike pride, “You know,

that's my daughter."

"A doctor always devoted and never oppressive. Always full of life and never closed off."

My father, a singular man. He can't be categorized. To avoid having to choose, he refuses this and prefers that, and shares everything. He always shares his bread, his soup, the medicine that makes his pockets stick out like balloons... Shortly before his death, although he was suffering from jaw cancer, he even shared half of his morphine.

"A doctor to the bone and a profoundly human artist."

My father, an enigma.

i M.A Charpentier, *Règles de composition*,

1690.