

**Robert Kelly**

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Years ago, I ran a little mimeographed magazine in the days of such things. I called it MATTER, and the cover of each of its five issues showed a curious glyph that I had made up, that to me meant: “Man at the mercy of his means.” I think of that now, because in recent years, I have been following a practice now and again of listening through music — by which I mean, letting the music make me talk. So I am in that sense a man at the mercy of the music. My rule (if that’s not too fancy a word) is to let the music begin and immediately start writing whatever comes to be said. And I write and write until the music stops. The only constraint I offer to myself is that I don’t want to talk about the music itself; I don’t want to talk about the drums, the strings, the melodies; I want them to talk through me, so there is a reciprocal relationship I fancy between me and what I hear, between what I hear and what it makes me say. I first practiced this little ritual through all the piano concertos of Mozart several years ago and other work more recently. Having the opportunity to listen to the four performances of these string pieces by The Orchestra Now, sitting there in my own house at the keyboard, while watching the music stream, I felt impelled to write these as an act of gratitude — as ever, to the music, and of course, those who make it.

— RK

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## *Listening Through:*

*Four Pieces for String Orchestra  
performed by The Orchestra Now  
at Bard College, 17 October 2020,  
conducted by Zachary Schwartzman*

## WITOLD LUTOSLAWSKI:

### *Overture for Strings*

The décor falls off the wall  
the widow waits at the well  
and so forth. Democracy  
is the most fragile song.

Hear me while you can,  
mouse-foot shifting sly  
among the little bottles,  
ink, cosmetics, juice

to make the world else.  
Do you remember else?  
You were there before  
palm trees and pilgrims,

before all the bother  
of belief. Come back to now,  
beloved, all my noise  
is a caravan to you. Thee,  
as we used to say. But then.

**BOHUSLAV MARTINU:**

*Double Concerto for String Orchestra,  
Piano and Percussion*

To hear without thinking –  
what a bird that would be!  
It could fly halfway to forever  
right to the seacoast of now.

Softly said, a word is waiting,  
your soft fingers, maiden,  
feel it speaking, warm  
in rough rock – always stone  
beside the sea.

Surf me, o Sea!  
she cries. Let the dragon  
grammar of ordinary life  
cool its flaming meanings  
just for now. Let me  
be the Sea!

Yes, I heard her  
cry that, it sounded like,  
what was it, the wind hurrying  
to get home? Subway doors  
slicing shut and a man  
cries Wait, wait? Glum  
silence. The train goes, wind  
falls. You have to say it all

over again. It's so quiet  
my fingers too are trembling  
as if I had to play a great  
harp that had no strings, beat  
my fist against air alone  
to keep time with, with what?

Every silence is a question —  
did you know that? In Prague  
in the old days they stood  
up on a tower and shouted  
their questions into the wind —  
the river was kind enough below  
to flow their inquiries away  
and leave the silent steeples  
to give their saint responses.  
Don't make me keep reminding  
you of all this — you know it too,  
you were there when they  
(remember them?) first brought  
the sea to your attention, first  
showed what water could do  
when applied to human skin.  
And we were born without knowing!  
Everything takes so long —  
that's why silence counts.  
And now I hear the answer —  
it's so quiet it always means you.



But a new wave comes along,  
erases what I said in the sand.  
Infidel articles to lose so quick  
what my life meant to proclaim.  
But the maiden still can run along,  
stirring countless messages,  
grains of sand falling from ankle,  
instep, intimate squeezes of toes,  
yes, everything can be read,  
even the unwritten. Yes, this  
is the unwritten, the glass unbroken,  
the shadow never cast, rise up  
and see what happens then,  
No meaning but in doing, so arise.

GRAZYNA BACEWICZ

*Concerto for String Orchestra*

Easy to be glad to be gone  
or at least cool in going.  
Not a gong – not a gun  
to start your run. Something  
slighter, amusing even,  
bird on a street sign,  
child in a puddle. Light,  
light, called so for a reason,  
light, light, shimmer  
in the spine. Keep going  
as if you had to,  
you have to. The light  
is watching every move,  
even the sweetest swing  
you ever rode from the old  
chestnut tree still  
depends, attending you.

\*

But you come  
and sit beneath the branch –  
no need to swing  
from it these days,

the world swings for you,  
shunt and hunt and count  
the stars that no one sees.  
You know they're there,  
you feel their Paracelsian  
potency in your pre-dream  
REM-free repose,  
what we never know  
stirs all we are and do and know.

M. CAMARGO GUARNIERI

*Concerto for String Orchestra*

What to do now  
when it does it  
all for me? Why  
did I sling on  
this silken tie,  
lace up my shoes  
and wobble up  
the creaking steps  
to the dance?

Isn't there a role  
for me in this  
mystery? Sleuth  
comes easy,  
villain maybe  
but please, please  
not the corpse —  
my feet keep twitching  
and my breath is loud.  
All dressed up  
and no one to be,

I feel like Gulliver  
in Miniland, useless

and very conspicuous.  
Give a kid a drum  
and you know what comes.  
But they are kind to me  
in their way, these little  
people passing through me,  
friends from god knows when  
and elegant matrons  
glimpsed in dream,  
kind to me, retired rabbis,  
children of the wind.

I mean the mind  
but then I always do.  
And it can be scary too,  
this empty dance floor,  
barn dance, smashed guitar,  
urns of still warm milk  
waiting for one more  
character I've never seen,  
the one who brings the milk to you.

Maybe I'll do a few  
turns on the floor  
all by myself,  
you never know,  
the dance may bring  
the dancer, the way

air brings the birds —

something awry  
with that comparison,  
birds have wings  
and I have none.  
Or none I can use,  
none you can see,  
but Wisdom hath  
a telescope the good  
book says, and she  
may behold even me  
swoop above the battlefield  
saving the fallen  
from the jaws of hungry dogs  
who whine like violins  
when foiled of their prey.

And yes! The dancers come,  
gingham and phony-folksy  
pigtailed and cowboy boots,  
hop through the wide doors  
around me, welcome,  
you dancers from the sky!