

*Waiting
for Music*

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NOTES ON THE POEMS

I have been close to musicians, visual artists and dancers all my life. This century those relationships have become the main impetus for my poetry, often dictating subject, shape, voice and length. This book intersperses these substantial segments with individual unrelated poems. These notes explain the context of the sequences and movements written at the request of composers, performers, artists and choreographers.

Brahms – Poems to Accompany Op. 117–119

This sequence stems from a conversation with the pianist and composer David Owen Norris about the rhapsodies and intermezzi for solo piano written by Brahms in his late fifties. Although he never said as much, it is felt that Brahms wrote each of them as a reminiscence of a woman he had loved but never partnered. David suggested I write some short poems on a similar theme, drawing on my own life, but taking their atmosphere directly from Brahms' pieces, to be read at a recital or set to new music.

Concerto grosso – After Corelli’s Op. 6, No. 4 in D Major

Every year at the auditions for the European Union Baroque Orchestra it was the tradition for the tutors to give a concert. As a trustee of the orchestra I was also asked to perform when I took part in the coaching in 2012. As a poet who cannot play an instrument, it seemed the best thing to do was to write a piece that mirrored the rhythms and style of one of the works the participants had been learning. The simultaneous voices roughly match the way the solo group interlocks with the *tutti* group in Corelli’s astonishing concerto. It was duly performed by me and the double-bass coach, Maggie Urqhart, in Echternach, Luxembourg.

Fantasias

As well as the rhapsodies and intermezzi, Brahms wrote several pieces called ‘Fantasia’. Mine are unrelated to particular works (or even composers), but the freedom of the form and its exploration of imaginings and tangential thoughts is much the same.

Putting in to Valparaiso

In 2014 I had the chance to go to Chile for the first time. My father was born and grew up in Valparaiso, but ran away to sea at the age of fourteen in 1932, soon after his parents died. He never went back, though he is commemorated on the family memorial there. The Chilean National Library in Santiago was incredibly welcoming, and let me spend a morning in its writers’ room examining Pablo Neruda’s manuscripts. The next day I visited his house in Valparaiso.

Some Songs

The composer Adrian Williams asked me to write some lines that could be set to short songs, as if they were taken from a Shakespeare play – like the many settings of the verses from *The Tempest*.

Scrolling...

This poem was written for *Supernova*, an internet project of the international contemporary arts network Auropolis, based in Belgrade. Every few weeks between October 2008 and October 2009 I added more segments online, and it became a poetic commentary on the year. It was performed live by me with improvised music by violinist Manja Ristic and cellist Ivana Grahovac at three venues in Belgrade in December 2009.

Llandian

A few years ago the Royal Ballet's chief choreographer, Wayne McGregor, suggested that I work with one of the company's emerging dancer-choreographers, Nathalie Harrison, to create an experimental poetry and dance piece. She asked me to write a substantial poem reflecting on the story of London as a city, from prehistoric times to the present day. It had to contain enough scenography for her to create movement, as if the words were music. In the end production time couldn't be found, so only these words remain.

Angel Match

In 2015 Cecilia McDowall was commissioned to write a short cycle called *Angel Songs*, and complained to me that nobody

wrote fast poems about angels. It seemed to me that a football match between angels, fallen and unfallen, was the answer. It was given its first performance by Gillian Keith at that year's Presteigne Festival. This is followed by a longer version, *Match Report*.

Seven Poems for Blood Orange's Exhibition in Brussels

Curated by Debra Welch and Sarah Simmonds, the visual arts collective, Blood Orange, was given the bare space of an old factory belonging to the Société Mutuelle pour Artistes in Brussels for a weekend of installations on the 19th and 20th of October 2012. They asked me to select some of the works to write about.

Venetian Serenade

This was conceived as a *scena* for soprano (Clare McCaldin), dance company and small baroque orchestra, to be set by Roxanna Panufnik and played by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. It was inspired by a 16th-century picture in the National Gallery in London by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo – of Mary Magdalene, in theory, but with the Venetian lagoon in the background. I moved the scene forward a couple of centuries and made it secular: a woman waiting for her lover at dusk in a small piazza, the woman narrating, all the other characters dancing. Sadly, the scene has not yet materialised.

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FOR MUSIC

BRAHMS

Poems to Accompany Op. 117–119

OP. 118, NO. 4

Intermezzo

Nothing had changed since Francesco and Chiara
Walked this way, through the bastion gate
In the southern walls and straight into the fields,
A dusty track, vines, olives, a smattering of goats.
The farmhouse a mile beyond presided over rich fields,
Tempered in our time by the tents and detritus of students.
Inside, the huge fire baked loaves in pallets on the ash,
Seared and charred haunches deep with herbs.
Latin boys longed for you and, dumbstruck,
Threw wine across the tabletops in libation,
Demanding the attention of their instant goddess.
How funny, I thought, you'd never succumb to that.
I slept alone, close but zipped against you, the last
Of those well-meant tense days and squandered nights.

OP. 118, NO. 2

Intermezzo

Maybe all the evidence is wrong –
This is the one true intermezzo,
A passage between two points, neither

WAITING FOR MUSIC

One of which can be confirmed.
Business has masked a twitch of pleasure.
Pleasure, unlikely now, might still gestate.
If I for once do not retreat; if
Your misgiving operates and finds
The tumour of a great mistake,
This cadence may lie unresolved...

OP. 117, NO. 2

Intermezzo

So many forms of exile, voluntary,
Inescapable, pointless, following sentiment.
There were roots to unearth,
Nurture in new gardens.
Our little exiles chose exile for themselves,
Are fortified by beams and plantations,
By walls of books and local obligations,
Vigilante societies of goodwill and contribution
That define us for no reason we ever chose.
Every home exiles us from each other.

OP. 118, NO. 3

Ballade

Inconclusive winter in a brown town,
A room devoid of suggestion, hope or artifice,
The ochre carpet swirls twinned
With stain whorls on the high, damp ceiling.
We could not dream of triumph when only

LLANDIAN

A Response to London's Story

I

Late evening, late in the fifth month.

The tide rises with the moon and floods
From the dark river the little stream
That fringes Lud's gate, turning it from Fleet
And clear to brown and sullen,
Creeping over the edge of the westward road.

Up the hill in the temple girls chatter
As they prepare the night's offerings,
Keeping an eye out for their chief and the moment
When the pink edge of the clouds upriver
Resigns itself to twilight grey.

They watch too through the eastern colonnades.

Their mistress will rise full tonight.
Already she lurks bloated low on the skyline
As though her menstrual size so early
Will chase away the sun and force
The city gates to slam before their time.

She nurses herself for the perfect hour; the temple girls
 Fidget more quietly now, impatient for the order
 To carry the platters and lay them
 On the trestles. Above, Diana, inhabiting her statue,
 Waits for the moon to pierce fresh darkness
 And give her life. She hunts
 At night, and the offerings are those
 Gathered for this moment in the week before.

New herbs, bluebells from the shady woods to the north,
 Above all venison cut from a wounded stag
 Who collapsed, a miracle, on the temple steps
 In final supplication that auspicious morning.

The moon rose, the crystal eyes of the goddess
 Flashed. Before her girls danced
 As they ate the seasoned uncooked meat,
 Propositioning each other's dreams.

II

Every afternoon ships dock against the quay
 Below the makeshift bridge, creating
 Competition for the ferry. Stevedores,
 Freed men from wars in Egypt,
 Illyria, Africa, hump the stores of oil,
 Wine, hemp, precious plants to test the climate,
 To the warehouses above the tideline.

There are cherry trees and vines,
Ornamental shrubs from high in Asia Minor,
Plums, too, but no hope
For olives in this rain and early frost.

Occasionally fighting animals, bears
And mountain lions so much more impressive
Than the native docile beasts (in a country
Where it is hard even to find a wolf)
Come ashore to spice the games,
Though the odds are always fixed – lions too valuable
For cheap slaves, condemned barbarians,
To be allowed to win.

Soldiers land away from the emergent city, downriver
At their spartan camps, and march briskly through
On their way to battles in the north and west.

From all across and up and down the island
Men converge to trade their treasures,
Copper and tin in fine-wrought bronze, gold,
Surplus women culled in vendettas
Too local for the world to care.

For seventy years the city grew, prospered,
Ignored the jealousies of lesser towns, the animosities
Aroused by armies it supplied, secretly despised.
Then news of unprecedented defeat
Sped south, a fetid wind, a tribe
They'd never heard of sought revenge for military rapes.

POSTSCRIPT

The title of this book was chosen several years before its publication in 2021, but the complications and restrictions of the COVID-19 period have made it even more apt. The travels in Italy and Greece, the Balkans and Chile, even Brussels and Paris, which it chronicles have become the stuff of dreams and impractical longings, no longer the norm for an itinerant writer. In 2019 I visited over a dozen countries around Europe and as far south as Tanzania. As I write this, I have been confined to Caithness in the far north of Scotland, mostly alone, for sixteen months: good for routine writing, bad for inspiration and sanity.

Music, electronically provided, has become even more essential than normal, but the rituals of live music-making, the companionship of musicians at concerts, the chance to get lost in the glorious acoustic wash of sound and then chew over the experience around a table afterwards, have all but disappeared. Festivals, those joyous concentrations where you can lurch from hall to hall with barely enough time for a sandwich in between, have all either been postponed or confined to screens. Personally I hate concerts on screen. It is impossible to focus, and directors rarely pick the right view. Perhaps because of all that, the projects and relationships that gave rise to many of these poems have become even more precious.

In the mean time, the position of all the arts has become more precarious. Politics, mainly tawdry right wing, but

also from the puritanical left, have intervened at almost every level in Britain to the detriment of students, freelance professionals, orchestras, broadcasters and producers. If this was the early nineteenth century I would be on Hazlitt's side in bemoaning the philistinism and small-mindedness of contemporary politicians. The only hope is that ours will be forgotten or redundant in a decade or two. Around the world standards of official behaviour are not just slipping, they are cascading to fresh lows of autocracy, irresponsibility and shamelessness; a pessimistic sign that humanity has not moved away as far as it should from the rubbish of previous centuries. The need for co-operation in the face of natural crisis is at the mercy of venality and short-term convenience. Perhaps it always was. It is still worse than unattractive.

That is all too depressing, though. I hope those that are now children will be able to read these words when they are my age with an indulgent smile, in the knowledge that the first half of the twenty-first century was not a complete waste of effort, and that these poems from its second decade celebrate as much as they mourn. The ideals of love, whether for a person or a landscape, a remnant of the past or the sudden glory of good music, are never out of date.

SIMON MUNDY
 Summer 2021

SIMON MUNDY studied drama at university, but soon veered towards writing poetry and reviews, and at 23 he found himself a music critic and arts journalist. A champion of the arts, he has served as Director of the National Campaign for the Arts and Vice-President of PEN International's Writers for Peace Committee, and he co-founded the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage; he remains an adviser to the European Festivals Association. His writing includes biographies, novels, non-fiction, playscripts and poetry. *Waiting for Music* is his fifth poetry collection. For the last forty years Simon has bounced between Mid Wales, the far north of Scotland, London and Brussels. He likes his indecision.

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