

The Specialists

by Janet Manley

The performance is almost seamless: the audience perceives only a singular symphonic sound issuing from the stage, roped tight by the conductor and allowed to roam only as far as the wings. Once or twice, however, the whimsical parade of the suspended chimes escapes, and can be differentiated.

The chimes light up, and ring out like a string of bubbles from the back of the orchestra, hovering in a sustained iridescent hue, until they spontaneously dissipate mid-air.

At this point, if you watch carefully, the percussionist responsible will retire and take stock, counting a 20 bar caesura in his or her head, or, if a longer caesura, disappearing onto the tiny stool rigged between marimba and snare.

Hating to overuse the magical bell ambience, most composers will limit use of the suspended chimes to, maybe, once per movement, the result of which is a complicated multi-task on the part of performer, who measures his or her metronomic steps when relocating between a studied timpani roll stage right in the 109th bar, to a restrained *ting* on the triangle stage left in the 174th, allowed only minimal expression on each apparatus.

The uninformed orchestral guest may wonder why we don't hear more in newspapers about percussionist melt-downs, tired performers who couldn't resist smashing the gong apocalyptically in the middle of an adagio, but the truth is it never happens.

Any percussionist will testify to years of intense study – years of staring at incomprehensible fractions of crochet written on pages conveying a language all but a few in the world can speak fluently; tier upon tier of rhythm layered over beat and syncopation – all of which they are loathe to throw away on an inspired drum roll rebellion during a piccolo solo. The problem for the under-appreciated, under-utilised percussionist is that no matter their desire to receive the attention due to their ultra-conditioned forearms, there is always a competitor who has lurked for five years in their shadow, practicing drum rolls on dinner plates, and squeezing stress balls in their sleep, waiting to swoop in and land a stool in a paying orchestra. For their passion musicians will endure poverty, anonymity, and status as societal pariahs.

The thing that annoyed Patrick most wasn't the way she lied on her 'home practice' log, and then forged her mother's signature, or the way she smashed chords into his piano with her sticky fingers, but her arrival every Tuesday, usually a minute or two beyond 4pm.

When the girl's mother drove up, she would inevitably park against his nature strip, one set of wheels disrupting the gravel he raked on Sunday mornings. The passenger door would open, and two grass-stained knees would appear, then an invariably torn/oversized/reeking pinafore would emerge, and run straight through his tanbark bed to the front door, ignoring the carefully placed stepping stones on the far side of the paperbark, taking his visitors purposely past a small plaque he had been given back in his youth by a Master who had thought him incredibly talented and promising.

She knew to let herself in, and wait on any of the chairs but the brown ones, or the ottoman, which, in fact, WAS NOT a chair at all. Her scuffed heels would swing back and forth rubbing dirt onto the skirting of his sofas, as she leafed through her music to see which books she had remembered that week, and curiously noted which piece it was he had specifically asked her to practice, occasionally relieved to find she recognized it.

It was to her advantage, and Patrick's annoyance/occasional amusement, that she was a terribly good sight-reader, and could veritably 'fake it' when she had neglected to practise a piece. When she had, at first, declared that she forgot which piece it was she needed to learn for the week, he had given her an exercise book which he ruled up, and dated, writing in clear, unusual handwriting the piece she needed to perform at the next lesson, which, of course, she didn't bring the exercise book along to.

During one lesson he had actually stopped her mid-*Für Elise*, worried he might have to thump her if she continued. It had been a long day in which his partner of nine years had removed her own piano and three bookshelves of score to a new apartment in a different suburb, while he pretended to check the strings in his Yamaha with a tuning fork.

The girl had fumbled over the opening, crashed hard onto an unintended minor key, and then felt compelled to press down the sustaining pedal she had just learnt to reach with her foot, jarring her incorrect harmonies and ill-regarded meter into a gothic mass of rage swilling around and around inside the old upright he taught on. He seized, and then lowered the lid slowly on top of her fingers, "I think we need to look at your theory books before we run out of time..." His forehead ticking under wild, woolly hair.

It is of little concern to the starving piano teacher the reasons that lead a parent to send a hyperactive, disinterested child to piano lessons when they would rather be rolling down hills inside barrels and inner-tubes, but Patrick keenly suspected that it had something to do with the bi-annual school recital. Though it was musically an assault on the senses, each parent endured it for the photo opportunity it offered of their children scrubbed up in their Sunday best – a rare sight now that no one attended church outside of weddings and funerals.

For the upcoming recital, this particular girl, Lucy, had picked "Moonlight Waltz" to perform. Her decision was made in part due to the fact she could get away with playing it with six fingers, and ignore the careful finger-specific denotations, and in part due to its easy timing and the pretty illustration of a dancing couple on the title page. She had also become slightly more independent at his urging, and could now turn pages by herself. This allowed her to show off and gave him more time to glance out at the overgrown backyard and the empty clothesline.

The final recital for the year took place on a hot Thursday night, which made the lace and taffeta outfits even more irritating for the children already thinking themselves incapable of behaving for a solid two hours. Mrs. Taylor, the principal, had managed to silence the squawks of different sized chairs over the hall floor to begin the night's program. Several unimpressed fathers quietly craned their heads and undid coat buttons in an attempt to settle into chairs that had clearly come from the K-1 wing.

For the opening act, two brothers, aged 7 and 8, played a duet in thoughtlessly composed thirds, knocking elbows competitively for all 30 bars of the piece, and missed the coda, much to the delight of their emphatic parents, who gave a standing ovation.

At this point Lucy had arrived, late, in a puffy-sleeved blue dress with a lace bib, and a matching blue ribbon tied asymmetrically in her hair. *Mutton dressed as lamb*, Patrick thought. To a stranger she probably looked quite innocuous. When her turn came she sat precociously down on the stool, and played loudly in an accelerating crescendo that looked set to run right away from her fingers until she reached the end of page two, and went to flip the page, instead flinging her entire piano book across the room, to the feet of her shocked piano teacher. Her face went scarlet under pale blue ribbon. She withdrew her hands, terrified, from the piano. She looked around horrified at him. Lucy sat frozen, her feet flexed above the pedals, as if he had accused her once again of touching the sustaining pedal. She remained there on the threshold of fresh ten year-old tears, unable to remember a single note on the following page.

For a moment his over-caffeinated and underfed chest smarted, and he rushed the music back up to her, placing his trained hand on her shoulder, trying to keep his smoky breath off her as he urged quietly, "Continue." Together they danced the imaginary waltzing couple through to their last slowing triplets, the way he had shown her, and taken a bow. She took his hand when he offered it with the little automatic dependence remaining within her from childhood, and did not notice the disguised strength in it, but only its encompassing size gratefully.

Lucy's legs had proven too short and stumpy for athletics – her fingers similarly stubbed and incapable of anything requiring great dexterity – but she had displayed a natural aptitude for the trampoline. It had been a job convincing her parents that her affinity for the trampoline went beyond that of the casual backyard enthusiast. However they had eventually agreed to send her to lessons.

There was something extraordinarily controlled and focused about the way a trampolinist could flip five different directions in ten jumps, then land seamlessly onto the mat on the eleventh, stationary. This did no great job of differentiating one trampolinist from another, however, as it was a required element in each routine. What set Lucy apart was the ethereal way she spun, twisted, and gyrated through the air, spelling letters in the smog of the gymnasium, dust arising from the foam pit, pausing on unnamed axes to further wring lower body against the upper, spiralling into infinity with the speed of a grass fly.

Though her friends and family were aware Lucy fared well in competitions, they still referred to her work as 'tricks', incapable of comprehending the complexity of what she did. Only the trained eye could detect the confidence with which she commanded every individual vertebrae a specific task from one move to the next; the way she articulated unspoken phrases through her bouncing from back to feet to stomach with a thousand degrees of rotation in between; the way she allowed herself to be artfully caught and released by an invisible line that floated her high above the mat, and down into its stressed threads, playing always on the interface between gravity and childhood.

No university trained adult could hope to comprehend the hyper-awareness of this small trampolinist; meditating on the bend and fold of multiplicities of the tiny elastic muscles stretched to her growing frame.

At age 16, Lucy found herself being congratulated on a career that was ostensibly over now school demanded her attention, and she was considered to have 'peaked'. Having found no use for her skills outside of a circus she gave up the trampoline, and found the atrophy of her once dynamic, multi-lingual body was a subtle, painless affair, rather like going to sleep.

Three years later, she was at a backyard party, someone's 19th, when she was called on for entertainment. Lucy regarded the crappy backyard trampoline and its soft springs and tired, sun-baked mat reservedly, then climbed up and began to bounce. She cycled her arms around as she powered up above the egg salad and wine in plastic glasses, making disciplined straight jumps. She was driving her feet down almost to the earth, demanding more out of the old mat, pushing and inhaling into a higher flight, now equal with the guttering on the roof, and far from the finicky conversations. She reached up

again, fixing the shopping mall a half suburb away with her eyes, and, bringing her knees to chest, gently scooped the air from in front of her, placing it on the reverse side, easily pulling a somersault. Unsatisfied, she called inside herself for another, and another, the mall rising and setting before her wincing eyes, as she then experienced a memory of her old routine reverberating through her lethargic muscles – she locked her hips to claw off the sky in the opposite direction, over and over, backpedaling to age 16. The dizziness overwhelmed her and she forgot what came next, the once infinite and effortless connections lost, like childhood memories encoded in a long forgotten language. Undirected in the air, her body braced, and she crashed to the mat, thrown off at a new angle, landing again onto the springs, and absorbing their stored energy in one violent shock.

Lucy stood up, still dizzy, trying to figure where it was she fell out of the air, and gritting her teeth to keep the frustration in. She decided they needed more drinks at the party.

Down at the Liquormart the clerk had begun to do his part for the environment, and was only offering brown paper bags to those who looked like they cared whether or not people knew which brand and type of alcohol they had purchased. Generally that included posh arseholes, and the kids who wanted people to think they were running Ribena back home – to top up the mocktail blender no doubt. The clerk had become quite the wine snob since assuming his twice-weekly role of ‘Liquormart guy’, abandoning his old white goon casks for Margaret River red blends he bought periodically, and cellared.

He surveyed the shop: there were a couple of people standing under the illustration of a fish which had been put there to recommend white wine to those too stupid to pair their own wine. There was a man agonizing over reds by the illustration of a cow, and some guys in the walk-in freezer rearranging his pallets so that they could get to the beer that came with trivia under the bottle top.

A man aged about thirty brought a bottle of Fifth Leg Chardonnay over to the counter, “Is this one any good then?”

“Oh, yes it’s sensational with Roughy,” the clerk replied, bagging the bottle. “Fifteen ninety-five.”

The man handed over his oddly shaped credit card, which flew through the EFTPOS terminal beautifully, a perfect read first time. He signed, and left.

Back at the Semillon shelves a girl was on tip-toes looking at the slightly pricier wines.

“They’re all the same,” the clerk yelled. The girl looked over at him, unsure if he was talking to her.

“Some people even say that if you close your eyes while you drink wine, red and white taste the same.” He added, “Some people...” Shrugging.

“Oh? Is that so?” The girl returned, putting the frosted bottle she had picked back on the shelf. “Someone ought to tell all the purple-toothed cab drinkers that, it might save them the need for so much whitening toothpaste.” They both exchanged a token bout of laughter, stopping when they noticed the man at the cab-merlots, who seemed to cower away.

The man looked around awkwardly to see if anyone was watching him, turning halfway before freezing and returning his porous face to the racks. He looked, thought Lucy, like he wasn't getting enough air. His very skin seemed to be yawning for oxygen, smothered under that surreal crop of dry tumbleweed hair that she recognized in that same instant. His gangly fingers played over the labels, some with medals, some with serious looking 'Bin 44' prints, as if he was feeling for Braille; searching for some kind of familiarity. The girl sympathetically noted the tag on his jumper which was out, and wondered if he remembered her, too.

Patrick did, of course, remember her, though he cared not how or why. Most of his acquaintances were mere side effects of his having to live in a 'community', so as to pursue his private interests, and earn a living. He generally assumed himself to be so wildly different from others that he avoided interaction at all costs, scolding himself later when he found himself begging for an audience – the ultimate artistic contradiction of purpose.

He could tell she had been drinking. It was evident in the way her hands would slip from one shelf down to another, followed by her gaze. There was something truly unremarkable about the gentle suggestion of moroseness her body conveyed, lolling from aisle to aisle in the liquor shop. Nothing unusual for a Saturday night anyhow.

Once the Bobby Burns Shiraz was located, he walked over to the clerk, picked out the exact change, and left without a docket, bare bottle in hand.

Standing in his living room the following morning, it occurred to him that the polished chestnut grand reflected only second-hand darkness, and, regarding the leaf-strewn veranda outside, he got behind the piano, and started to push. Wheels that had long sat seized, turned reluctantly, and left carpet for the first time. Their prints lay behind exposed and deep as fist marks. On the veranda fallen bark and curled gum leaves scattered his stage. He pushed the piano through the litter, catching twigs in the wheels, until it stood out of the shadow of his house. He then positioned the piano stool parallel with the keys,

flicked his fleece jacket behind him, and sat down. Beginning slowly, he pedaled gently, allowing the energy to build through the Concertina, imagining himself performing to a deep, thick crowd, punching holes through it with his searing music. Though he did not consider himself a composer, or feel a competent improviser, somewhere between the competing squeal of next-door's hills hoist, and the sharp pecks of currawong song in the breeze, his fingers traveled beyond the limit of his sheet music and refused to be silenced. They stretched between latitudes of chords not yet traveled, moving through his thoughts faster than is possible to hear. The studied posture of his hand was unbreakable, drumming keys onto their strained strings harder and harder, the gentle friction of the wooden keys lost to a locomotive beat issuing out from the great engine he worked, driving it harder and harder through the desolate afternoon. His music steamed out the lid, which was propped up, freeing harmonics that sometimes melded, and sometimes fought for dominance like pistons, jarring up and down in the invisible clouds of madness that startled cockatoos off telegraph wires, and had dads turning off lawn mowers a half suburb away to listen. His phrases snuck through fences, under kitchen windows, in front of televisions switched to cricket, and distracted the people of Aranda from their Sundays for this twenty minutes.

Without an ending, he found he had finished, and sat for a while, contemplating the uneven lean of the fence. The neighbours proved their finite capacity for astonishment, and went back to weeding and washing their cars unperturbed. The man sat for a good, long time, muffled by the sound of shorn grass, and when leaves began to fall on the piano keys he laid a felt cloth over them and closed their lid. Wild, mottled reflections of swaying gum leaves skittled across the grand. Nothing to be done. He had an urge to hang out his washing.

There was a load that had been sitting in the machine probably for a week by now, a heap of singlets, varying in age and thickness, pooled and pressed together; a rainbow of coddled off-white hues. A wonderful tuneless gust whirled the clothesline above his head as he bent down to scoop clothes up from their basket, and he pegged them slowly, evenly spaced around the four sides. When he had run out of singlets, he wound the clothesline up for maximum ventilation, got himself a tea and sat on the veranda watching them blow.

The following week saw an escalation in the production of glazed, puffed, hot cross buns, tied in packs of six. While the first stand of them had been a pleasant surprise for shoppers – a once yearly treat to be taken advantage of – they were now reluctantly added to trolleys near checkouts, great stacks of them clogging the arterial routes of the supermarket and threatening to snag on trolley wheels. Shoppers took

a pack or two, not because they were on sale, but because they felt it safer to ward off bad hot cross bun karma in the lead up to Easter. At bakeries the buns slowly phased out the seeded, pull-apart, scrolled, cobbled, iced and sesame-encrusted loaves, sandbagging the bakers behind their counters. What had at first seemed a sweet, delicate taste – contrasting summery sultanas with lightly-spiced dough and a sheath of thinly spun honey glaze over plump white cross – now resembled recycled grey pulp, speckled by sunken raisins. Families did their best to aid the community in ridding the town of the Easter-buns, sneaking them into lunchboxes, and offering them as dessert if they could not be disposed of during breakfast. It seemed they would never be done with.

Patrick regarded his neighbours as they unpacked shopping from the boot of their car in the driveway. A jumbo pack of Sorbet, jumbo box of Cornflakes, 3kg bag of oranges, and four, *four* packs of hot cross buns. *Such mediocrity*, he thought. *All that is wrong with the world.*

At the same time his neighbours regarded him with equally critical eyes, penance for his unwashed hair, his rickety car, his pile of bricks letterbox, and his playing piano through the middle of the night – it made the children restless, suddenly desperate to build sand castles, ride bikes, or fly kites under the solemn night sky.

He preferred the night; the sprawl of suburbia was least apparent then. In a town the size of Canberra, the stars still permeated the urban fog that clouded street lights and malls, and from the top of the reserve he hiked the vast blackness of the lake swallowed some of the nearby halogen haze, allowing the ranges beyond to bristle in the moonlight.

On the backside of the hill, in a house the mirror image of its neighbour, Lucy sat pondering her economics textbook. Her parents had thought Arts/Law would be a good university course to take, but her uncle was convinced the world needed more Commerce/Economics graduates. Careers testing had told her she would be well suited to jobs such as 'art curator', 'prison guard', or 'professional dancer', but she remained unconvinced of the value of psychometric testing. This was reason enough to pass up an Arts major in psychology.

Two of her braver friends had enrolled in Fine Arts courses; one in a drama course, one in music. The latter, Liz, was a harpist. She had been the first and only harpist to play for the school orchestra, and would arrive several hours before a performance with her entourage of truck and trailer to transport the harp, only to weave ethereal performances that were entirely snuffed out by the trumpet section.

A month earlier, she had had a falling out with her mother, and was kicked out of home. Liz had arranged for a friend to bring a trailer

around to take her harp, and drop it at the School of Music for her, thinking she would soon find somewhere else to live, and a way to transport it. Four weeks on and she was still crashing on people's couches, and walking over an hour to reach the school each day to practice in one of the poorly designed rooms, which sent acoustics flying around off the walls like a squash tournament. She played for hours, and would stop intermittently and rest her forehead on the great harp, feeling its silent vibrations inside the wood grain peter out. She had admitted to sleeping a couple of times overnight at the school, protesting that she had been practicing late, and it was safer to remain in the building than walk the streets.

Liz was a terribly sensitive girl, and emotions seemed to hit her in the same delayed and sustained, muted way that her harp strings would slowly take cause when plucked. Similarly, there were few that could properly differentiate her harmonics and subtleties of phraseology, outside of the trained ear. She was properly misunderstood, was Liz. There was not a lot Lucy felt she could do for her, outside of offering a trailer now and again.

For the time being Lucy had mindless sums to calculate, and she did so while listening to her scratched Jeff Buckley CD, and eating a mediocre hot cross bun, which graduated from charred, crummy outside, to dry, dusty inside, where the margarine had not soaked through. It was a shitty midnight snack.

"Filthy yellow ficus tree, filthy yellow ficus tree, you are noxious weed, and you shall be cut down! Cut down and sent out of my garden!"

Harry had been out by the fence half the morning, cursing at his ficus in rounds, rhyming and repeating in the livid sunlight. He stooped beneath it, and occasionally took jabs at it with his cane, rustling the half-turned leaves into a flutter of autumnal fury. He would yell for a time, spit in its direction, and then pause, glancing around the garden at the wild tomato bushes and raspberry plants, licking his lips. Time in his plots used to keep Harry happy, spending hours rearranging piles of earth, and making room for seedlings and saplings, but in his old age he had perhaps grown tired of stoking life from the barren land, of cultivating it patiently from season to season.

The neighbours each responded to Harry's performance in different ways. The children on the block adjacent to his giggled through the slats in the fence, shrieking and running away when he turned and raised his thorny eyebrows at them.

Patrick walked down off his veranda and leant against the fence, gently calling, "What seems to be the problem, Mr. Pratt?"

Harry shuffled around by staggered inches to face him, "Well it's these rotten plants of course! Vermin poisoning me tomatoes... Who's that? Is that Patrick?" Squinting through the fence.

"Yes, Mr. Pratt, it is. Can I do something to help you?"

"Help me!" he exclaimed, coughing and laughing simultaneously. "No, you need to take care of that jungle of yours, I think! That is where the weeds come from. Noxious weeds! Need to be cut down!"

Patrick continued, in his gentle way, oversized hands grasping over the fence tops, to try to subdue Harry. It was just an episode. It happened from time to time when his kids didn't have time to check on him.

His neighbour had a different approach. She called Veterans Affairs, and within the hour a car was over to haul him off for a 'check-up'.

Harry's daughter weaved her way through the suburb in her Mazda, riding curbs once in a while, intent on picking up her father, who she knew to be waiting inside his front door with his going-out hat on, cane on lap, and good trousers an inch or two above his tan socks. For some reason the image of him alone and dressed up made her feel more guilty than did her idea of him digging quietly in the backyard in his dressing gown on weekends when she could not visit. It was a common tale, he didn't want to leave his house, but was growing less and less capable of looking after himself, dementia becoming cosy amongst his antique interior. Taking him to the concert hall was her one big effort to do something she hoped might cheer him up, and remind him of a time he had more in common with.

Lucy had promised Liz she would take a night off her assignments to see the performance. She stood at the mirror, unsure of how she wanted her hair. The only people who attended the Philharmonic were old people, parents, and other mad musicians, she pursed her lips. Frowning, she smoothed her hair into a ponytail. The mirror was the only good place she could get by without needing a smile to convince everyone she was 'okay'. The crazy questions people asked, "Is school okay?" "You having fun at uni?" When they should all have known her legs were capable of so much more than spreadsheets and Powerpoint presentations, moving on a singular plane between lecture rooms, tutorials, home, and the occasional party. She sneezed, catching a glimpse of her own face in the mirror, screwed up in anguish, before her eyes blew shut.

Having performed in front of great crowds solo in his younger years, Patrick had no good idea why his fingers should feel so shaky now, at this amateurish event. It was hard enough to find talented musicians with a car, let alone arrange for them all to congregate in the one hall, and even more difficult to drum up an audience these days. Often the ratio was roughly equally split between those on stage, and those in the seats, and each was forced to profess gratitude to the other. Tonight's concert performers consisted mostly of community players who kept on families and jobs around their practice, and then there were a few dedicated scholarship students and masters offering their time.

Patrick had been roped in by someone who remembered him, and thought his name might give the promotional poster a bit of drive, though there was no such thing as celebrity in classical music anymore. He had agreed, seemingly reluctantly, though he felt something of a rush at the thought of someone *hearing* him, seeing his hands rush over the keys, and matching his face with the consequent notes.

Looking out from the wings at the building crowd, Liz drew a little air, and flicked her thumbs against the hard pads on her fingers, where she plucked the harp strings. Everyone in the orchestra had been instructed to wear black, the universal musician's uniform, and her high turtleneck emphasised her pallid complexion, hidden these weeks in the high rehearsal rooms of the School. The impending concert had given her something to aim at, and the conductor, who was partial to French horns and harps, had given her the lead-in solo to the second movement. From the back of the orchestra, where her harp wouldn't obstruct other players, she was allowed this moment to post a flock of hovering notes, based around F minor, which she knew would take off through the hall and induce the audience to pervasive contemplation of things they would never quite grasp. She would tell them of dragging the cumbersome harp down carpeted halls unaided, only to sit and spin subtle colours of white unheard and unappreciated in the air saturated with practice. She would tell them of curling up under a stiff piano cover 11pm through 7am, when the caretaker would unlock the doors of the School, and allow the students in.

The lights dimmed up and down a few times, accompanied by the panicked doorbell sound, and people took their seats. They expelled

their last coughs, and the curtain was promptly drawn. The orchestral cochlea lay glittering before them, musicians sitting tall in their seats, or hurriedly adjusting their music stands. In the next moment a small, suited conductor emerged from the wings, and was followed across the stage with the sound of a dense winter rainstorm, hailing down about him as people clapped rapidly. He lifted his hands and drew the applause to a close, then turned to the strings, prompting them to tremble, drilling a fine A through the hollow of the concert hall with their bows. This established, the conductor introduced the woodwinds, and then the brass, as the uniform note matured and filled out, like swelling dough. He allowed it to sit for a moment, then teased it out thin like pasta, arms wide and fingers pinched, before snapping it off altogether.

The orchestra settled, a few rearranged their scores, and some shuffled their chairs, amplified in the artificial noon. There was a curious and uneasy silence crystallizing in the hall as players and their audience sat waiting on the conductor. Particularly for those in the grandstand, there was something terribly disconcerting about acclimatizing to a silence when they could see an entire arsenal of reed, string, bell, and timbre poised to erupt, commissioned to shatter the stalactite calm above the guests.

Finally, the conductor raised his baton, and the orchestra raised, bows drawn, lips pressed, waiting for the mille-flick of his wand that always occurred right before the obvious downstroke that he demonstrated for the audience, seemingly miraculously rousing the entire orchestra into melodic action. The sound that issued was glued fast, like a stream in which no part flows faster than another. Through Faure's introduction they created a marvellous illusion, convincing those listening and watching that the conductor was in fact in charge of some singular beast, harnessing and whipping it to his design, when in reality the sound was a fickle pastiche of individual contribution. A hundred separate entities.

Liz understood her meagre part in the show, a transparent layer for the collage, however braced herself for the solo that she knew would allow her to play her tragic phraseologies over the audience, and up into sound boards positioned at the top and back of the hall. The people would no longer be able to ignore her when she had means to prod them in their soft spots with her music. It all had to be worthwhile, otherwise why had she sacrificed time, money, a social life, a home only to sit obscured by double bass and bassoon. Of course she had never considered the life of the composer, mute to communicate his own creation, channelled and filtered through a hundred different machines all at once, hoping to endure.

The friends, family, supporters, and older folk short of things to occupy their time were all acted on by the music like naïve carnival goers. They did not comprehend the ways in which the composer had

knitted strands of lighter, higher melody with deeper middle, racing the fleet footfalls of piccolo and clarinet with the longer strides of the euphonium and French horn. For the most part, the individualized exertion and movement they witnessed on the stage bore little relation to the holistic sound they perceived.

Deep in the left outfield, Harry drifted off into unrelated thoughts about a late radio announcer, and engine parts of an old bi-plane. His daughter was tense against her seatback, hoping her father might enjoy the grand old sounds, and keep from having an episode for one night.

Harry had not registered the presence of his neighbour onstage, however had spent ten distributed minutes hypnotised by Patrick's emphatic crop of hair bouncing around as he dove into the symphony with his bare hands, tearing out chords infested with black notes and ornamentation on the piano at the fringe of the semi-circle.

A vibe of urgency held all the strings in the orchestra tight, each player pushing theirs to its elastic limit so as to extract the maximum from each stroke, violinists sawing rapidly across theirs with smoking bows. Indeed the conductor had built a nice fire of dynamic which he now stoked thoughtfully, drawing the first movement to a close. The musicians abandoned their tunes tersely as he signalled the end.

Liz, however, allowed her final note to throb under her torn fingers, idling the harp and stalling it at the friction point. The surrounds drew quiet, and she saw her signal and began to stroke pictures and scenes over the harp, plucking in-between concrete emotions, laying thoughts and pictures in the stream like driftwood, some taking off faster than others, building to something... She plucked up and down the register with crescendoing anxiety, returning again and again to the B6, which eventually yelped at her touch, and recoiled from the ends of the harp, curling, severed, broken. The tangle caught her fingers and snagged in and around the adjacent strings, her playing brought to calamitous end like spokes suddenly disallowed from turning. Liz shot up clutching her burnt hand and spun around, looking, looking for anything, for a solution, for someone. She did not see Lucy out in the dark of the audience, she did not see Patrick looking up empathetically at her, and the audience still did not perceive her drama, they began to clap, thinking her solo was complete and she was taking a bow. Liz saw the gong. Before she could even think about how it was played she found herself squeezing past tubas, leaping trombones, and picking up the great padded drumstick, lifting it above her head blindly, and chopping it down hard on the ancient copper behemoth with eyes winced shut, hard enough to feel the give in the head of the drumstick. The sound was imperceptible at first, then rumbled deep inside, before shooting across the hall, intense as a jet, shattering the acoustics, and unleashing a madness through the chamber.

Harry, upon hearing the sonic boom, awoke, and stood, yelling about the war, about his tomatoes, about how he wanted a roast this Sunday. Children jumped onto their seats, bouncing and screaming with delight, mothers and fathers trying to calm them. Patrick took his cue and launched into his midnight symphony that had only ever been offered to his living room, while the conductor waved his baton madly, trying to conjure silence again. Ushers leapt onto the stage, unsure of what to do, one loosened his bow tie before making the leap, and Lucy, seeing them start, sprung onto her feet, and pushed along her row, and down the aisle to go catch her hungry, lunatic friend. The percussionists had rushed to wrestle the drumstick out of Liz's locked hand as she swore at them, bumping the guy on double bass, who fell forward, knocking his music stand into the back of a trumpeter's head. The upset rippled through the entire orchestra and before long half had risen, and taken off into the wings to regroup. The stage lay scattered before the stunned audience, quieting down once more, and at the far back, the harp was now exposed. Free of musicians and instruments, it sat tall and elegant on the landing, romantically curved like a stylised heart, comic and Cupidean all at once.