Record Time

August 1, 1998 By Edmund White

Loneliness can be a full state or an empty one, by which I mean that when I was 13 in 1953, I usually felt forlorn but occasionally—especially in the presence of a work of art—triumphant. Most of the time, at school, on the bus, on the street, I thought I was embarrassingly conspicuous if I was alone. I was convinced everyone was burningly aware of my isolation, almost as though I were trapped in one of those sweating, grinning embarrassment dreams. In the high-school corridors, gliding from one class to another, grazing the walls, I didn't retreat into a comfortably grim resignation, waking up only when I was seated once again in the biology lab or in honor civics. No, I suffered and smiled and mentally debated whether I should try to walk along with that girl I knew from choir practice or join those guys from gym class, who weren't all that popular, after all. My loneliness was ready to sizzle and explode as it leapt from one electrode to another: High-voltage emptiness.

There was the amniotic sloth of a long bath or the agitated mindlessness of reading the back of the cereal box over and over or the sad-sack squalor of sitting on the floor in the sunroom, listening to all the clocks ticking in an empty apartment.

But mainly, every day, there was the same sort of highly anxious inactivity I'd felt last summer looking for a part-time job, waiting in the reception room in a starched collar, hoping to catch the eye of my potential boss, wondering why my appointment had already been pushed back 40 minutes, observing the hands of the wall clock millimetering toward five, closing time. That's the way I felt alone at school, as though I were ready at a moment's notice to go into action, smile, charm, display my wares—but until then forced to wait and hypothesize the worst.

The other kind of loneliness, the full, self-sufficient kind, never came on me with lightning suddenness but had to be slowly wooed. I'd bring records and scores home with me from the public library, and behind my door, which I'd outfitted with a flimsy hook and latch, I'd listen to the old vinyl 78s with the gleaming outer-space black grooves and round burgundy labels printed in gold as though they were Ruritanian medals for bravery. I'd listen to Vincent D'Indy's "Symphony on a French Mountain Air" (I can't bear him anymore, now that I know he was an active, hate-driven anti-Semite) or all 48 records of Tristan and Isolde (the work of another anti-Semite, one whom I admire, alas). The Tristan records were in four matching leather-bound volumes that looked like snapshot albums. Inside the leather cover the records were slipped into individual pale-brown paper sleeves sewn into the book like pages, each with an open side only at the top and with a round cut-out in the center to reveal the label and number of the record in the sequence, printed just to the left of the hole. Most classical records were numbered so that a good pile could

be stacked on the spindle, then flipped, though real connoisseurs were against stacking.

I'd worked three months at that summer job to earn the money necessary to buy a three-speed record player, which would accommodate the 78s borrowed from the library as well as the new 331/3s and 45s I was buying at a dispiritingly slow rate. My very first record had been a 45 of Chet Baker playing "Imagination" on trumpet and singing in his high voice stunned by heroin into expressionless neutrality.

The speed had been changed and the needle flipped when I went from 78s to the other speeds. If I wanted to listen to "Imagination" (and I always did), I had to dislodge the slender silver spindle with its protruding lip that retracted when the needle lifted and dropped another record into place. I'd substitute a fat, black bludgeon for this shiny stiletto. Whereas the 33 1/3s were less cumbersome and contained almost half an hour of music on each side, they lacked the historical glamour of the 78s, which, in some cases, as a bookmark written with a steel nib in fading purple ink revealed, had been donated to the library before the war by a certain Mrs. Neumann (her motto was "Musica dei, vox populi"). The scores were often pristine—I held in my hands a first American edition of Puccini's Tosca with its art-nouveau cover design of the passionate Italian heroine all wasp waist, long gauzy gown, imploring hands and hornet's-nest hair. I saw from the dates rubber-stamped on the orange card inserted into its own glued-in pocket that these scores had scarcely circulated in the last half-century. These cards made me realize how neglected and private and chancy was musical history. Just as I could check out the first English translations of Anatole France and Pierre Loti with their white leather bindings tooled in gold and braided flowers on the spine, in the same way
I was in direct physical contact with these early musical scores of Cavalleria Rusticana, of Verdi's Requiem, of Massenet's Thais, of Wagner's Lohengrin, of Strauss's Der Zigeunerbaron. I was equally intimate with these scratched recordings of Lauritz Melchior (whom I'd heard sing a solo concert in Dallas when I was nine) of Jussi Bjorling (whom I'd seen, corseted and tiny, flailing his arms on the stage of the Chicago Lyric Opera as he sang Rodolfo in Bohème), even of "Madame" Schumann-Heinck, whom my mother had seen in some Texas cow palace during one of her innumerable farewell tours just after World War I.

I'd come home from school by way of the library, my arms burdened with records, scores and books, and I'd barricade myself in my room. As the Chicago night began to fall earlier each December evening and the snow on my sill would melt and refreeze, I took comfort in my room with the sizzling radiator, the chocolate brown walls, tan burlap curtains, gleaming maple chest of drawers, comfortable armchair and the old brass lamp from my earliest childhood, originally designed before my time as a gas lamp but now rewired with its glass chimney still intact and its luminosity still capable of being dialed down into yellow dimness. I loved the coarse, red-wool blanket with its big Hudson Bay dull satin label showing a moose and a canoe sewn into the upper-left-hand corner like a commemorative stamp. I loved the pale celadon-green pots I'd bought in Chinatown, their raised designs nearly effaced under heavy glazes, their wide cork tops sealed shut with red wax that had to be chipped away to reveal the candied-ginger clioco within, floating, slimy, in a thick, dark sugary syrup. Now the ginger had long since been eaten and the bowls washed clean, but they were still faintly redolent of their spicy, mysterious contents. I loved my

seven bronze Chinese horses, which were stored in a brown velvet box cut into exact silhouettes into which the little statues could be wedged. Each horse was different, head lowered in a gentle arc to graze or thrown back to gallop, each weighty and cold in the hand. I loved my music boxes given to me one by one, Christmas after Christmas: The turning brass cylinder under glass plucking brass tines that played the Gounod waltz from Faust; the unpainted wood Swiss chalet with the mirrors for windows that played “Edelweiss”; the miniature grand piano; the revolving water mill. But I was less impressed by the look of each box than by the richness of its sound. The Gounod I liked the best since the sound wasn’t tinny but resonant, and the box, if I held it, throbbed in my hand with expensive precision.

I loved the smell of the boxes of tea I collected and scarcely ever drank—I’d inhale the dry, smoky perfume of the Lapsang souchong leaves, the Christmasy clove-and-orange odor of the Constant Comment, the acrid smell of Japanese gunpowder green tea, not really like a tea at all but a kind of grass, or so I imagined. I loved the way the hard metal lids fit snugly into these square boxes and had to be pried open with the handle of a spoon. I loved sitting on the floor, my back propped against the bed as I turned the broad, smooth pages of the opera scores in which the original words were translated, very approximately, into the same number of English syllables so that one could sing along. I’d keep changing the stacks of 78s, some so badly gouged that I’d have to nudge the needle out of a deep crevice, others so worn down that my needle, itself not ideally sharp, would just slide over the bald surface in a split-second condensation of long minutes’ worth of music.

But, more often than not, the records were still in good shape, perhaps because they were so seldom checked out. Sometimes for extra protection they were even inserted into translucent envelopes that were then closed and tucked into the heavy, yellowing paper sleeves. The early 1950s record jacket designs were rarely printed with more than two colors and were incongruously jaunty—black musical notes zigzagging like bees around a mauve cut-out of Wagner’s head, surmounted with his baggy beret, or all of Respighi’s “Fountains of Rome” picked out in yellow-and-pink dashes and dots as though they were flimsy wire bird cages—or else the covers were just dumbly romantic (a huge red rose superimposed over a brown violin for Brahm’s violin concerto).

I was alone with classical music, just as a reader was alone in the library or a museumgoer in those days was alone with paintings. Everyone else in America was listening to Perry Como and Dean Martin or looking at Arthur Godfrey’s breakfast program on the flickering black-and-white television screen. American popular culture was cozy, queasily banal, pitched at everyone in the family—there was no Elvis yet, nothing tough or twangy or raunchy, just all these bland white people, the men in jackets, dark knit ties and white dress shirts, the women in fluffy skirts and long-sleeved sweaters, acting out cute little skits week after week on a hit parade show as they thought up new variations on a storyline that might fit the unchanging lyrics of a song that lingered for months in the Top 10. People 20 or 25 or 35 looked and acted alike in their dress-up clothes as they cracked their cute jokes and simpered and skipped between giant cut-outs of sunflowers or waved from the flimsy back platform of a papier-mâché train.

One day I discovered the collection of circulating art books at the library and came home with a volume of ukiyo-e prints introduced by a spirited, seductive text. I liked it that these prints recorded the look of famous Kabuki actors or courtesans in the "Floating World of 18th- and 19th-century Edo," that no one in Japan had taken these woodcuts seriously until French painters had discovered them. I liked the refinement of tall ladies standing in a boat, opium pipe in hand, calling past the strutwork supporting a bridge. I liked the intimacy of a beauty coquettishly blackening her teeth while her cloudy gray cat tiptoed over her makeup table. I liked the ecstasy of a monk in his hermitage, the paper wall thrown open, contemplating snow-capped Mt. Fuji reflected in a black lacquer-rimmed round mirror. The crevasses descending down from the snow cap looked like the lines radiating out from a toothless mouth. I especially liked the young lovers running on high wooden shoes through the visibly slanting morning rain, a faint smile on their lips, their slender bodies nearly interchangeable, the umbrella grasped in the joined hands….

It seems to me now that I had few judgments about music or paintings or poems, and if works of art were difficult, that didn't put me off. I worked my way through almost all the titles listed inside the paper dust jackets of the Modern Library. I'd figured out that these books were classics, and if my attention wandered while reading Nostromo, I simply started again and concentrated harder. It was not up to me to declare Conrad a bore or to wonder how a professional writer could allow himself to use so many words such as indescribable, ineffable and unspeakable. Similarly I felt it necessary to know something about Vlaminck and Van Eyck, about Rembrandt and Cezanne, as though I were preparing for God's Great Quiz Show in the Sky rather than piecing together a sensibility.

When other people, older people, took a strong stand for or against a Sung vase or T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" or a Jackson Pollock "drip" painting ("Pure charlatanism!"), I was so impressed by their opinions that I immediately adopted them as my own and sometimes repeated them for years to come without always realizing they were internally inconsistent and needed to be reconciled. I was so ecstatic as I sprawled on the rough red Canadian blanket, dialed my brass lamp down to its dimmest wattage, listened to Flagstad's "Liebestod" in which a human body was sublimated into pure spirit, as I smelled the smoky tea leaves or brightened the light and looked at my Japanese lovers in the rain, each wearing a matching black cloth hat that formed a wimple under the inconsequential chin—so ecstatic that I didn't think to judge these experiences any more than a starving man turns up his nose at food. I was so shocked that I laughed, scandalized, when other people said, "This Sung vase with its pale raised peonies and delicate craquelure is worth more than all of Michelangelo's sculptures," or "Eliot is a fussy old maid with his royalist politics and furled umbrella, but he has brought all of world culture together into a fragmented collage—fragmented because all collages are necessarily fragmented, but wonderfully suggestive and systematic, finally."

I was thrilled by so many sleek, purring opinions. I, a self-invented Midwestern public-library intellectual who ate books and records and art reproductions the way other people ate meat and potatoes. My kind of art meal was always eaten alone, just as I improvised on the piano alone, and I had only rare contacts with other art consumers. My mother's friends who had all the quirky, nuanced opinions seemed to have drifted out from New York or Boston. Their take on my favorite

authors and composers (“Wagner certainly has his longoure, and if he is the greatest composer, we can only add, ‘Alas,’ just as Gide sighed, ‘Hélas,’ when he named Hugo the greatest poet”) seemed to me almost sacrilegious, as though they were discussing sales figures for the relics and relic-derived products of a saint whom I actually believed in.

To judge a work of art depends on a certain fastidiousness, just as to taste a wine properly requires not being actually thirsty. But I was hungry and thirsty as well as a true believer in art’s miracle-working properties. For me artists and writers and composers did not exist in time any more than general truths can be dated (later, of course, I learned that each epoch produces its own truths, but we didn’t know that back then). When I was reminded of the age of a work of art (by the fresh look of the Tosca score, or by a story about Pollock’s recent death in Time), I was disturbed, as when a headline-grabbing geologist claimed he could now confidently date the Flood and had even found the exact landing site of Noah’s Ark. This intersection of the mythic and the temporal struck me as indecent.

I had never played with toys as a child. I’d improvised on the piano, I’d invented complicated scenarios for my puppets or for my imaginary friends and me. I’d wandered through nature, receptive as a nose and eyes on a stem, thunderstruck by the smell of the lilac bush next to the Congregational Church, awed by the glassy tranquility of Lake Michigan as I waded into it on an August evening and stood there, white and stark as a single soprano note, and watched the raised waves radiate out from my slow steps.

Now, at the age of 13, guiltily, I dropped the latch on my bedroom door and played with toys. Not real toys, not store-bought toys, but my own invented toys. I organized triumphal marches on the red Canadian blanket between ranks of tea-box military tanks, noble processions of the seven bronze Chinese horses, of a pink jade bodhisattva and a soapstone Buddha, of giant floats of music boxes all playing at once while the hordes shouted their approval (a sound-effect I provided with my whispered roars as I hovered over the whole scene, invisible and manipulative as God). Finally I donned the red blanket as a cloak and put on a recording of the Coronation Scene from Boris and made my royal entrance, imagining the rows of bearded, brocaded boyars. I heard the clangor of all Kiev’s bells.

I thought to myself, “This is what little kids go through, this total immersion in fantasy, this self-sufficient solitude, the good kind, the triumphant kind.” I was ashamed—but not so much that, as the school day would draw to a close, I wouldn’t become excited by the thought that soon I’d be able to start playing again—not exactly with toys, but with my fetishes, whose lurid aspect had dawned on me only recently.

My favorite games were all about power, benign power, the same games I played outside in the snow by constructing ice palaces, a Forbidden City for my solitary empress, an Old Winter Palace for my ailing Tsarevitch. From the opera records I borrowed I’d learned all about Boris’ coronation and the pharaoh’s triumph march in Aida as well as about the people in Turandot wishing the Son of Heaven 10,000 years of life. I was so high-strung that Mimi’s death—and especially

Violetta's—could make me tremble all over and sob hysterically (I wasn't your basic baseball-playing freckled little kid); what I preferred, what I found soothing, were royal processions, and if I'd been Queen of England, I would have managed to "process" on a daily basis, my raised gloved hand describing small circles in the air.

One day I read in the paper that Greta Garbo's Camille would be showing at a remote movie theater. My mother agreed to drive me way out there if I'd come home on the train by myself (she verified the times). In fact my mother indulged me in nearly all my whims. It was she who'd let me decorate my room as I'd wanted, who bought me Chinese horses and my yearly music boxes and who'd driven me all the way down to the South Side that one time when I'd wanted to attend a Japanese Buddhist Church. When I pleaded to go to a military school camp (I'd just read biographies of Napoleon and Peter the Great and was suddenly attracted to power even in its less benign forms), she enrolled me against her better judgment: Halfway through the summer I was begging her to let me come home, which she even more reluctantly allowed me to do. It was a spring night when I went to that distant community to see Camille, a town that I couldn't name now and that I never saw again. It appeared to have been built all at once in the same manner in the 1920s or even earlier in what was even then a nostalgic style with converted gas lamps, cobblestone streets and half-timbered storefronts. The spring was not advanced enough to have produced any flowers beyond big, gaudy sprays of forsythia.

It was raining and the cobblestones were as slick and even as dragon's scales. There was no one on the street. At last we found the movie, which was being shown in a narrow church, perhaps as a fundraiser. If so, the programing was a disaster, since the only other member of the audience was an old man seated two rows away on a folding wood chair, as I was.

But once Camille began, I was absorbed. Not by the humble, scratchy black-and-white look of the thing (it was a bad print, but my borrowed 78s had taught me to overlook that); I was used to technicolor, even three-dimensional movies, and I'd never seen a vintage film before. Garbo's acting style would no doubt make kids laugh now, but I was used to melodrama from the operas I'd seen. Anyway, this was an exaggerated style but unlike anything I'd ever witnessed before. She could change in a second from a sadness as piercing, as physical, as light directed into the eyes of someone suffering from a massive migraine to a joy that shook her as agitatedly as though her big, lovely face were as bright and faceted as her pendant earrings. In one scene she was sophisticated and skeptical, one eyebrow raised, and in the next tender as my mother when I was ill with a high fever. Her voice would go from a fife's excitement to the bagpipe drone of her grief, a grief that really was just like a migraine that requires drawn curtains and deepest solitude.

I didn't quite understand why she had to give up her lover. What had she done wrong? Wasn't she even, all things considered, too good for him? Nevertheless, I liked the idea of sacrifice in the abstract and hoped to make one soon. Her lover had a straight nose and oily black hair, but I disliked his long sideburns and thought his acting was as unconvincing as his morality was caddish. That didn't matter—after all, Jussi Bjorling had had all the allure of a waddling duck, but he sang with the clarion tones of a trumpet calling reveille.

I knew how the story turned out from La Traviata, the very first opera I'd ever seen, but this knowledge made my tears flow all the hotter as the end approached. When the lights came up, the old man was snoring peacefully. No usher was in sight, although I could hear the operator in his projection booth rewinding the film. I pushed open the main church door. The rain had stopped, but the bare, budding trees were still dripping and the sound of my lonely footsteps rang out.

I found the little suburban station easily enough. A sailor was also waiting for the train, playing a mouth-harp, quietly, to himself, as though he were rehearsing a speech, trying to get it by heart, or evoking a sentimental tune for his ears alone. I felt washed clean and faded almost to the point of transparency. I was very old and wise, not in need of a great love since I'd already had one, afraid that something might jostle my mood, which I wanted to carry without spilling all the way home. The night was conspiring graciously to help me—the deserted, dripping village with the gas lamps and cobblestones, the sailor with the mouth-harp, even the sight of forsythia blazing in the dark on the hillside next to the station.

The train came, just two cars long. The only other passenger was an old, black woman, asleep and smiling, split shoes too small to contain her feet. The sailor kept playing, and I looked at the few dim lights that suggested the depths of these old suburbs with their huge wood houses in which everyone was asleep.

Back in my room, I drank a glass of cold Welch's grape juice in the dark and pretended it was wine. I opened my window and toasted the wet spring night, which didn't feel like the beginning of anything but the very last plucked note at the end of a long, soft, slow coda.

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