

The Colours of the Masters

by Sean McMullen

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I first heard Chopin perform the night that I had just been ordered to cancel my flight back to New York, along with the well earned vacation that was to have followed it. Paris was reminding me how much I disliked the place by treating me to a soaking, windswept drizzle as a taxi carried me to an address near the Parc Monceau. For the previous month I had been supervising the installation of some computerised sound processing equipment in our company's local office, and I was tired, lonely, and aching to be in a country where most of the people willingly spoke English.

It was still early in the evening as the cab pulled into the drive of a mansion that probably dated from the early Nineteenth Century. There was a long, open path from the driveway to the porch of the house: the rain intensified at that very moment. I paid the fare, took my bags and trudged down the gravel path, by now so despondent that I did not bother to avoid the puddles. Gerry Searle, my immediate superior in the company, met me at the door.

"I had a few nasty things to say to you until a minute ago, Gerry," I said as he took my dripping coat, "but just having someone to talk to in English makes me forgive you for quite a lot."

"Forgive me? For what?" There was no surprise in his voice.

"For giving me the Paris installation, instead of the one in Rome. You speak French, but my second language is Italian. My parents still live in Rome, I could have saved the company hotel bills. And did you know about the local autonomy dispute that's going on in the Paris office? The staff have boycotted speaking English and I spoke only twenty words of French until a month ago."

"Rico, I know how the situation is here, but I just had to get you to take over," he said, trying seem earnest but unable to face me. "An important deal came up, a potential recording contract worth hundreds of millions. That's also why I asked you to delay your flight back to the States."

"*Ordered* me to delay my flight back. And why me? I'm one of the back room boys. The only time that I ever set eyes on the musicians we record is when they appear on television."

I sat down heavily on a teak and velvet parlour stool and wiped my face with a handkerchief. A servant appeared from behind me, spoke to Gerry briefly, then carried my bags off. A servant. The furnishings also confirmed that this was not only the house of someone rich, but someone whose family had been rich for a long time. Very nice, but what would they want with a computer analyst specialising in digital sound software?

"The recording has to be done in this house, Rico," Gerry explained as he beckoned me to follow him. "The musicians are very famous, but..."

"But?" I asked, making no attempt to get up.

"They are dead. The people who own this house are distant relations of mine, and when I visited them they-- "

"They probably held a seance and conjured up Mozart's ghost, and you just happened to have a recording contract in your pocket!" I shouted, standing up and snatching my coat from the rack. "Send my bags after me. Company business, like hell! Bunch of whackos. Try to stop me and I'll go to another outfit-- I've had offers."

"Please, Rico, I can explain."

"Good. Phone me in New York, but try to get the time zones right or you'll get my answering

machine."

I turned to the door, only to be confronted by a pair of elderly identical twins. The women would have been in their early seventies, and were dressed in smart grey suits and frilly white blouses.

"We have mechanical recordings of Frederic Chopin playing his own piano works," said the one on the right in confident English.

"We are not, ah, whackos," said the other, her voice and accent identical. "I am Claudine Vaud, and this is my sister Charlotte."

"We are very respectable. We do not even know to hold a seance," Charlotte stated indignantly.

I was taken aback. "Edison got the prototype of his phonograph working in 1877," I replied. "Chopin died thirty years before that."

"Twenty-eight years," Charlotte smugly corrected me.

"But an ancestor of ours invented a way to record sound-- except that she could not play it back," continued Claudette.

"But she could play it back as colours-- we think."

"But Gerald has a way to change light back into sound, except that he is having trouble analysing his digital signal."

"No, no, he was digitising his analog signal."

"You don't even know what an analog signal is-- "

"Ladies, please!" Gerry interrupted them. "Mr. Tosti is very tired, and has probably not had dinner. Could you tell the maid to prepare another place at the table, and we can explain the problem to him as we eat."

"All right, but you were not explaining it very well just now," said Charlotte as they left.

Gerry took me to the living room, where a coal fire was burning. The place was filled with Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century furniture, all tasteful, expensive and well maintained.

"Tang Dynasty," said Gerry as I examined a vase on the mantelpiece. "Everything in this house is genuine, Rico, including the music. The family goes back to the old aristocracy."

"So you have a bit of blue blood yourself?"

"Oh no. The family connection comes from Katherine Searle, who arrived from the U.S. in the 1820's and later married the heir. My own branch of the family is descended from her brother, who stayed in Boston and ran a factory."

He pointed to a row of portraits on the wall to my left.

"That one on the end is Hiram Searle. He was born in Boston in 1765, and is responsible for the basic principle of the sound recording machine that you are about to see."

The artist had obviously taken some trouble to clean up his subject, but the dreamy, slightly scruffy appearance of the inventor showed through nevertheless.

"He was a great inventor, but had little business sense. Fortunately his wife was as sharp as a tack where money was concerned, and the family business did very well. When Katherine, the eldest daughter, showed musical talent she was sent to Europe to get a better education. That's her, in the next painting."

Katherine Searle was a stunner, with black curly hair cascading down past her shoulders, a pale, thin face, and big dark eyes. She was seated at the keyboard of a forte-piano, and was half turned to face the artist.

"She used to write long letters home, and sent a lot of the latest sheet music. That was probably where the big family scandal started, because apart from being a good engineer, Hiram fancied himself as a musician too. Our old family diaries describe how he would play the latest keyboard music that Katherine had enclosed while his wife read the letters aloud to the rest of the family.

"In 1825 his wife died. His son was old enough to run the factory by then, but he could not control Hiram's obsession with Beethoven. He practically worshiped the man and his music, said that he embodied the spirit of the new century."

"In a way he did."

"Maybe, but anyway Katherine had a lot of contacts in the musical world by then, and wrote home

about Beethoven's deafness in great detail. To Hiram it was the greatest tragedy imaginable. Here was a man who wrote music that was nothing short of divine, yet he could not hear it. He decided to invent a machine which would allow The Master to hear again."

"An amplifier!" I exclaimed. "But it can't be done without transistors or valves: ear trumpets don't help much."

"That's right, and Hiram Searle was a good enough inventor to know when to give up on a futile line of thought. He decided to build a machine that would let you see the music you were playing instead. That's it over there."

I had not given the grand piano in the corner much attention until now. From a large rosewood box mounted over the keyboard a length of cloth covered electric cord trailed away to a mains socket. A screen in the box faced the player.

Gerry explained that the original light source had been a Davey carbon arc-lamp driven by a voltaic pile-- all fairly new technology in the America of the 1820's. The more modern filament bulb had been added when the mechanism was restored about a century later. He removed the cover, to reveal a complex system of fine rods and levers, all driven by thin metal diaphragms, and in turn moving a system of paper-thin mirrors and tiny lenses and prisms. Every moving part was mounted on jewel bearings. A frosted glass screen faced whoever was playing the piano.

"Of course this is a modern Steinway," said Gerry as he showed me the metal horns that picked up the sound and delivered it to the diaphragms. "The original forte-piano is away being restored."

"That is right," said Charlotte as the twins entered. "It was strung with gut originally, but then metal strings were put in. They damaged the bridge and buckled the soundboard."

"It was the greater tension, but they couldn't get the gut, you know," Claudine added. Gerry had already explained that you could tell the twins apart by remembering that Charlotte always spoke first, and that she was the technical expert, while Claudine was the musician.

I was given a demonstration of the pianospectrum, as Hiram Searle had named it. Claudine sat at the keyboard while Charlotte flicked a switch and adjusted some ivory dials. As Claudine began the Schubert Moment Musicale in F-minor the faint coloured ripples on the screen from our voices became waves of alternating, blending colours, shaded according to the chords, and heightened in places by the melody. It was pleasing, and very relaxing to watch. After a time I looked at the movement of the mirrors and levers through the open access panel. How does one describe a device with no ancestors or descendants? It was all blurs and flashes, almost alien.

"The main innovation is the use of the metal diaphragm to change the sound waves into mechanical impulses," said Gerry. "Beams of white light from the source are split up by the prisms, then are re-directed by the mirrors and lenses, which are moved by the levers from the diaphragms."

"For the early Nineteenth Century it's sensational," I said sincerely. "What a pity he never got a chance to show it to Beethoven."

Uneasy silence followed my words. The twins looked to each other, and then to Gerry. He cleared his throat uneasily but said nothing.

"Oh why not tell him?" said Claudine, speaking first for a change. "It all happened nearly one hundred and sixty years ago."

"But what about poor Hiram's memory?" said Charlotte unhappily.

"If Gerald can turn those recordings into sound, the truth will have to be told."

"Very well," said Charlotte, sounding like a child expecting a beating. "Gerald, would you be so kind?" He nodded.

"Hiram Searle died in Vienna in 1827, a few weeks after he had arrived with his pianospectrum," said Gerry as he walked to a bookcase on the other side of the room. He took down two thick, leather-bound volumes. "I have here the bound collection of his letters, and Katherine's diary for 1827. Hiram wrote to Beethoven and promised to demonstrate to him a machine that would defeat his deafness. Beethoven replied, and was very enthusiastic. The trouble was that he expected something that would allow him to hear again. Hiram had not been clear about what his invention did."

"He did not like it," said Charlotte.

"He was very disappointed," said Claudine.

"He used a four letter word."

"Except that it was in German, and was seven letters long."

"But in English it would have had four letters."

"But not in French."

"I'll just read Katherine's account of the demonstration," Gerry cut in hastily. I had begun to realise that the twins' dialogues with each other could last a long time under the right conditions. "The passage is not dated, but it is probably from the first week of January.

"Yesterday's demonstration was the very worst of disasters. Herr Beethoven was very ill, being much troubled by a swelling of the abdomen. Father conveyed the pianospectrum mechanism to his residence at a very early hour of the morning, and we worked until noon to set up the machine on one of The Master's own pianos. The poor instrument was much out of tune, harshly voiced, and had five broken strings, all from The Master trying to beat an audible sound from it. It required a great deal of work from myself before its state could be called anything like well-tempered.

'At last the mechanism and strings were as well adjusted as circumstances would permit. The Master entered, smiling but walking slowly, and obviously in discomfort. Father introduced him to me, but of course he could hear nothing. He sat down at the keyboard and peered at the screen of the pianospectrum.

Father connected the voltaic pile to the lamp in the machine, then struck an arc between the carbon rods. The Master was puzzled by the fumes rising out of the little smokestack, and asked father what it was. Father shook his head and pointed to the keyboard: he shrugged, then began to play a few chords at random.

The pianospectrum displayed its colours on the screen perfectly, but this was obviously not what The Master had expected. He held his ear near the screen and played some more chords, then struck the box housing the delicate mechanism with his fist. Next he played the opening bars of the Alumbblatt in A-minor, Für Elise. Clearly the mechanism had been damaged by the blow, as no colours were displayed on the screen. He frowned, struck the box again, then began to swear at father, something about bouncing, I believe.

Now father scribbled a note, explaining that all that the machine could do was to translate sounds into colours. This sent The Master into as severe a rage as such a sick man could be capable of. He insulted father terribly, calling him an incompetent ass, then he hit the pianospectrum again, stamped out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Father was close to tears as he unclamped the pianospectrum from the piano. Although I was furious with The Master at the time, I do acknowledge that he is a very sick man, and that father had not specified to him just what his machine would actually do. Today father has gone hunting in the woods to calm himself. I cannot imagine what game he expects to find in the middle of winter.'

"The next entry is dated January 9," said Gerry, looking up for a moment.

Father has been found at last, dead. In the opinion of the searchers, he might have been carrying his rifle carelessly when he tripped over a fallen branch, causing it to fatally wound him. In view of his trouble with The Master, however, suicide seems more likely. The authorities were very reluctant to certify the death accidental. Although I knew him to be an expert with guns, I told them that he had always been careless with them, and had had many accidents. May God protect his soul and forgive me for the lie. It was all that I could do to protect his good name."

"Nine weeks later Beethoven was dead," said Charlotte.

"Hiram's death was eventually certified as accidental, but there was still a scandal,' said Claudine.

"Katherine moved to Paris, and changed her name."

"But she was already secretly in love with young Count Vaud, so she married him and changed her name again."

"It would have caused another scandal if people knew he had married the daughter of a suicide, so she concealed her background."

"She could never play the piano in public after that. She was so good that she would have become

famous."

"Newspaper people would have traced her true identity, written about her in gossip columns and drawn cruel cartoons."

"They would have said how could she be a good musician when Beethoven called her father an ass?"

"She became a patron of great musicians and composers instead."

"She invited them home for dinners and parties."

"They played for her in this very room."

"Liszt, Chopin, Clara Schumann, she knew them all."

"Sometimes she secretly recorded their playing with another machine. Even in her diaries she never explained why she kept the harmonoscribe hidden from everyone."

At that moment the dinner gong rang through the rooms of the mansion, and the twins led us away to the dining room. My head was spinning from the revelations of the past half hour, especially the pianospectrum. It was a marvel of precision engineering, at least half a century before its time, but the step from this to the recording device was more marvellous still, I was to see.

* * *

Dinner would have been extremely formal had it not been for the circumstances. Gerry told me that he had begun the installation that I had been sent over to complete, and had decided to call in on the Vaud sisters and tell them that they were distant relations of his. This was on his second evening in Paris. He told them that he had been intrigued by Katherine Searle's apparent disappearance from the family correspondence after 1827, and after years of research had discovered who she had married. The twins were suspicious at first, but after deciding that Gerry was a decent young man, decided to tell him everything.

"Even after I saw the pianospectrum in action I still thought it was great family history, but nothing more," he said between mouthfuls of food. "Then they showed me the harmonoscribe, and I knew that I had the find of the century, even without the playback machine."

"But what is the harmonoscribe?" I asked for perhaps the tenth time. "You say that it is meant to record music as colour, yet you haven't even described it."

"Rico, you just have to see it for yourself. Ladies, would you please excuse us? It's time we got to work on that set-up in the parlour."

"By all means," said Charlotte. "We shall have the coffee sent there."

"And we shall come ourselves," added Claudine.

If I marvelled at the pianospectrum, I stared in disbelief at the harmonoscribe as we entered the parlor. Imagine a heavy mahogany spinning wheel with a circular, silvered glass disk clamped to it. Rising directly out of the base was a tracking arm driven by a worm gear mechanism, and mounted on the arm was a diaphragm to drive it. A long sound tube led away from the diaphragm to a metal horn that lay on the floor.

"We have set up a playback device of our own," began Gerry, but I stopped him.

"Wait, just slow down there. How does this thing record in the first place? There are no grooves on the disk."

"Not needed. The tracking mechanism moves the needle at the end of the arm as the disk turns, and it ends up tracing out a spiral path. At the same time sound waves travel down the tube from the funnel and cause the diaphragm to vibrate. This moves the arm, and hence the needle vibrates as it travels, scratching a record of the sound waves in the silvering."

"It is all driven by clockwork," said Charlotte as she entered.

"And she kept it in the next room when she was recording the playing of a musician," said Claudine, who was right behind her.

"A trusted servant set it in motion at the right signal from her. The sound tube went through the wall and was hidden by a curtain."

"But why keep it a secret?" I asked. "It's a great invention."

"She never gave the season in her diaries, but it must be obvious," said Charlotte. "Just imagine her showing the machine to, say, Wagner. He would wonder where she got the idea, and knowledge of science. Soon he would start making enquires about her past. That would never do."

"No, and if it was Wagner he would blackmail her for money."

"And sex."

"Nonsense. She was too old by the time she met him."

"She met Franz Liszt about the same time, and he tried to seduce her. It is in her diary."

"Liszt tried to seduce every woman he met."

"So did Wagner."

"Please! Ladies, I need to brief Rico on the technical problems we've been having," Gerry broke in.

His experiments had shown that the glass disks could hold a little over three minutes of recorded sound, and Charlotte had kept the mechanism in perfect operating condition. The playback device had been lost at the time of Katherine's death. According to her notes and diaries, she had been experimenting with a device that would reproduce the music as a colour display, something like that of the pianospectrum. Because the layer of silvering on the glass was so thin it could never be expected to drive a playback needle that could generate sound.

Gerry had adapted a modern turntable to hold the glass disks, and was using a laser scanning head to trace the path of the scratches in the silvering. When he had first seen the disks he had realised that anything that was recorded in a systematic and orderly way could be scanned, digitised, and played back through a computer driven sound synthesiser. This is where I came in. The software in the synthesiser's micro had been designed to filter out and enhance faint signals from old grooved disks and cylinders, not a flat trace on silvered glass.

When I asked for a microscope to examine the trace on the glass plate the twins produced a century old brass model that might have been contemporary with Louis Pasteur. I measured and sketched the waveforms, then began to modify the software.

"The problem is in the buffer masks," I explained as I worked. "At present it interprets everything as anomalous waveforms because it thinks it's getting output from a conventional grooved phonograph disk."

Gerry hovered nervously behind me as I began to change the software. While quite at home with re-wiring and modifying even the most expensive hardware, he had a dread of tampering with working computer programs. He had fed the signal from the laser's pickup through a frequency analyser before it reached the micro. The most substantial part of the change was altering several dozen assembly language bit-masks that defined the characteristics of the waveforms being input. It was the sort of tedious work that I hated, so I entrusted it to Gerry-- he was so frightened of software that he would be far more meticulous than myself.

I had been working for over three hours without a break by then, and I sank into one of the large, comfortable armchairs as Charlotte poured my coffee into an eggshell china cup. For a while I stared at the mechanism that Katherine Searle had built so long ago. It was a magnificent achievement for its time, no less so than her father's pianospectrum.

"I wonder where she got the idea," I said aloud.

"Oh, we know that," said Charlotte. "She wrote it in her diary. She always kept a diary."

"The 1829 diary," said Claudine. "I'll fetch it at once."

"And the 1837 diary," Charlotte called after her. "That was the year that she got it working."

Claudine returned with the books and handed me one that was open for March 10, 1829. It was quite a long entry. Katherine had decided to repair the damage to the pianospectrum inflicted by Beethoven two years earlier. The part explaining how she got the idea for her recording machine was very explicit.

'As I removed the lid from the box housing the levers and mirrors, I noticed that one of the levers had been knocked from its mounting, and had fallen against the worm gear of the clockwork regulator. This had caused the point to be dragged across the silvered surface of the large mirror that concentrated the light from the arc-lamp.

"The line was nearly straight for a short distance, then all fine waves and troughs, then straight again

until the point reached the mirror's edge and stuck in the brass mounting. As a diaphragm had been attached to the other end of the lever, I concluded that it had been Herr Beethoven's playing that had caused the wavy line to be traced. It was there, on the surface of the mirror: the actual sounds he had produced, even though he was long dead.

'After examining the scratches with an enlarging glass, I spent the afternoon in thought. Could not these scratches be played back through the pianospectrum as colours? The compositions of a great composer are immortal on paper, but the playing of a musician dies with the flesh. Perhaps these little scratches could be used to record performances forever. There may even be a way to change them back into sound, or at least colours. If only father were still alive. He had such a way with these problems.'

"We still have that mirror," said Charlotte. "It is locked in a special case."

"There is a note inside, which reads 'This scratch is the playing of Herr van Beethoven, January 1829'," said Claudine.

"Here is the entry where she perfects the harmonoscribe," said Charlotte as she handed me the second diary. It was open at June 15, 1837.

'I can now record short performances as scratches on a silvered disk,' I read. 'There remains the problem of playing them back as either colours or sound, and sometimes I despair of ever finding a solution. I have tried using fine beams of coloured light, directed in layers, but this provides a representation of the sound's volume alone, not its pitch. One might be able to mount a battery of small coloured mirrors at the edge of a second disk, but I do not think that any watchmaker could fashion clockwork fine enough for this to work, and the image would be minute indeed. On the other hand, I know that my friend has a solution, and that I shall always be able to rely upon him.'

"Who is this friend that she mentions?" I asked the twins. "Was he another inventor?"

"We do not know," said Charlotte.

"He is mentioned in the diaries from 1835 until the year that she died, but he is never identified," said Claudine.

"She died in 1875, you know."

"I think he was a secret lover."

"Nonsense. She mentions that it was always platonic in 1873."

"What about after that?"

"She was as old as we are."

"We could have affairs if we wished," Claudine concluded, turning to me. "What do you think, Mr. Tosti?"

I said that I had no doubt of it, then retreated to the micro to check the waveform masks that Gerry had completed. He returned to correcting the alignment on the laser head and pickup while I ran the modified program through some tests. I was wearing a pair headphones as I worked so that I could monitor the output port. The A440 tone sounded clearly as I selected it from among the computer's data sets, and likewise that of middle C. Now I tried to test out some chords, but instead I heard a loud, crackling hiss, overlaid by a regular knocking and some softer rattles.

At once I realised that Gerry had managed to accidentally rename an output label, and that I was listening to a live signal from the laser head. I had put my hands up to the headphones to remove them when I heard an unmistakable cough-- the heavy, deep-chested cough of a dangerous medical condition. A man's voice said "*Scusi, Madame.*"

As the music began I had the impression that I was listening to a radio transmission from a very distant station-- from another planet, even another star. Amid the background noise a violin played a dreamy little piece by Paganini. The player was very good, with a deft bow technique and an excellent sense of timing. The pianist followed the melody with discretion and sensitivity.

The instrument had to be a Stradivarius. I had learned the violin for several years, and had once been permitted to play one of the legendary instruments for a few minutes. I recognised the powerful G string and characteristic tone. The playing was excellent, the very finest that I have ever heard. Fear mingled with my admiration, an unreasoning fear that I did not understand. These people were deities of music, masterful and note-perfect. Even if I practised for a lifetime I could never play like this: in fact nobody

could surpass or even approach such playing.

The melody brightened into the major key as the piece ended. The man said "*Merci, Madame,*" and she replied "*Oh Monsieur.*" The hissing and rattle continued for a while, then stopped with a loud pop.

"I'm sure the tracking mechanism is as well tuned as it can be," said Gerry. I noticed that my hands were still raised to take the headphones off.

"Run it over that disk again," I said, unplugging the jack to the headphones and flicking the switch to the speakers. Gerry and the twins were as absolutely still and silent as I was while the music played again.

"Number three: NP and KV, 1838," read Charlotte. "That will be Niccolò Paganini and Katherine Vaud, of course. He said '*scusi*'. He was Italian."

"And he coughed. He was not very well," said Claudine. "He died two years after this was recorded. The theme is from Rossini's *Mosè*. Paganini's variations on it were very popular last century."

"Paganini himself," I whispered in awe.

"It's worth millions!" exclaimed Gerry. "A recording by the greatest violin virtuoso ever, and he's not even around to argue about royalties."

* * *

Over the ensuing hours we carried dozens of boxes of the silvered disks up from the basement. It was as if a group of children had dug up a treasure chest at the beach, and were strutting about wearing priceless crowns, tiaras and necklaces before relinquishing it all to the adults. Katherine had secretly been recording the playing of her famous guests and protégés from the perfection of her harmonoscribe in 1837 until her death in 1875. Apart from the famous composers, there was quite a number of disks of famous virtuoso pianists of the early and middle Nineteenth Century. Singers and players of other instruments were on no more than five percent of the disks.

At first we played the disks of the most famous people. Clara Schumann's piano technique was flawlessly precise, yet with a warm grace that I have heard in no modern performer. Franz Liszt, on the other hand, played with such sparkle and excitement that I felt wrung out at the end of each disk. Chopin was a disappointment to me. Although he would hold his own with the top five pianists in the world today, I felt that the brooding melancholy of his style was probably more appealing to the Nineteenth Century taste than ours.

As we played each disk I made a tape recording-- just in case someone dropped it later. At 4am Charlotte opened a rare and old bottle of French Brandy, and we drank a toast to Katherine, Hiram, and the great musicians of the last century. We felt very close to them by then, as over the previous five hours we had heard snatches of their conversations, laughter, and occasional curses as well as their music.

"This will have to be marketed very carefully," Gerry told us, "and of course we will have to let scientists look over everything and test it for authenticity. I would estimate that your share would be about two hundred million over five years, ladies."

"Is that in francs?" asked Claudine.

"American dollars. The classical music market does not move as fast as that for pop music, but it is very big. Every music lover in the world will want at least one CD or record of selections from Katherine's glass disks."

"It is a lot of money, Gerald, and we are already rich enough," said Charlotte. "You worked out how to play sound from the disks, which we could never have done. You must have a share."

"Well, that's very kind of you, but the company will give me a big bonus."

"Nonsense, you must take the money," said Claudine. "And Mr. Tosti as well. He did... whatever he did to repair the computer."

"And he appreciates fine music."

"And he said that we still look seductive."

The twins winked at me in unison and smiled. Gerry gave me a puzzled glance as I blushed and hastily got up to put another glass disk on the turntable.

"I remember that English conductor telling me how seductive I was," continued Charlotte.

"That was in 1937," Claudine elaborated. "He seduced you, too."

"And you."

"Not until his next trip to Paris."

"He probably thought you were me."

"He did not. I was very careful to tell him."

While they continued to argue Gerry left the room to phone our company's New York executives and tell them of our discovery. I had noticed that as we searched through the recordings for famous performers we were weeding a large number of disks by Katherine herself into a separate pile.

It occurred to me that I had not yet heard her play alone.

When she had been playing the accompaniment on the three Paganini disks, and during the duets with Brahms, she had given a very good account of herself. I selected a disk of her playing a piece from Robert Schumann's Woodland Scenes-- The Prophet Bird.

A professional concert pianist once told me that this piece is a nightmare to play properly, with its odd accents, timing, and variations of dynamic and texture. Katherine had either practised the piece a great deal, or was so good that no effort was evident at all. The twins noticed too, and stopped their bickering to listen.

"That is a new player, and a good one," declared Charlotte.

"No, it was Madame Katherine, I remember some of her style from the duet she played with Brahms," Claudine corrected her.

"We must hear more."

"Yes, put on another disk, if you please."

We played Katherine's disks for the next forty minutes, and slowly discovered that she was at least the equal of Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt. A researcher like Clynes would say that she exploited the sentic forms of each piece to the fullest extent, so that the music was a strong emotional experience, rather than just entertainment. Months later a critic said that listening to her play the Chopin Etudes was like a firm yet gentle hand seizing one's heart while another stroked it.

I also discovered that she had modified the harmonoscribe in 1854, so that it could record for seven minutes continuously: this required me to drag Gerry away from the phone to adjust the tracking head to the double-density recordings.

While he tried to tell us how excited the folk in New York were at the prospect of releasing an album of Chopin playing Chopin, we tried to explain about how good Katherine's playing was. Whether she was outshining Liszt with his own showpiece compositions, or playing her own frothy but pleasant pieces, she had no peer, and we made our way through a selection of her disks until the clock struck 6am, and the maid arrived to take our orders for breakfast.

"Will you be releasing only one album of her pieces?" asked Charlotte. "She has recorded enough for at least a dozen."

"We might get one of her recordings on the album of highlights of the collection, but she's an unknown, no matter how good she is," Gerry explained without concern.

"But she is so very good," insisted Charlotte.

"As good as the best of the great composers," added Claudine.

"And virtuosos."

"You don't understand the recording industry," said Gerry. "Most of the selling potential comes from name and reputation, not talent. And even talented players need expensive promotion campaigns, not to mention concert tours, media interviews, and all that. Katherine has been dead for over a century. We've never had to run a publicity campaign for a new, dead virtuoso before-- it would be very expensive to run, and it could be a flop. She can't be there to pose for photographers, sign autographs, and speak for herself."

"But she gave us all these recordings," I protested. "Don't you think we owe her something?"

"We owe her plenty, and she will get it-- as the inventor of the first sound recording machine," said Gerry. "That's real recognition, after all. Just think, only people who know anything about classical music

will have heard of Clara Schumann, but literally everybody knows that Edison invented the phonograph."

"Except that Katherine was first," said Charlotte frostily.

"Well, let's be fair," I said. "She could only record, not play back."

"She did have a playback machine!" exclaimed Claudine. "She was always writing about the one developed by her friend."

"Whose name we never learned," said Charlotte. "Why, the playback invention may be somewhere in Paris at this very moment. We could run advertisements, asking people to search their attics and offering a reward."

The maid entered and announced breakfast. Charlotte and Claudine stood up at once, but Gerry stayed in his chair, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"I need to put a few more disks on tape for Rico to take to New York this morning," he explained, and I gave a silent cheer. "I think I'll pass up breakfast."

"You will do no such thing," said Charlotte. "The maid will bring croissants and coffee to you in here."

I volunteered to stay and help, and we set about taping another half dozen disks that Katherine had made in her later years. The last disk of all was dated only three weeks before her death, and was titled 'To My Friend'.

"Looks like another of her own compositions," said Gerry. "Put it on. We might be able to use it on the 'selections' album as well-- you know, start with her accompanying Paganini and finish with her very last recording."

"Yes, the twins would be pleased if she was featured on two of the tracks," I said as I mounted the disk on the turntable.

The hiss, rattles, and knocking began as usual, but instead of playing the piano, the long dead Katherine spoke-- and spoke to us personally!

"*Monsieur, or Madame, or perhaps there is even a group of you-- you are the friend in my diaries, the inventor who has always given me hope, the person who has allowed my music to live again,*" she began, her voice weak and her breath shallow. She was speaking in English as well, perhaps anticipating that her disks and devices would be given to the American branch of the family one day.

"My friend from the distant future, I hope that most of my glass disks have survived to entertain and enchant you. Although I could never play the music back myself, I have recorded the very best musicians who have visited me over the past four decades for the music lovers of the future. This fragment of my century's music is my gift to you, but I would ask a small favour in return.

"During my lifetime, and for the most cruel of reasons, I was unable to perform on stage or become a celebrity. When misfortune was at its very worst, I chanced upon this method of recording, and realised that I could use it to preserve my playing, as photographic plates preserve a person's likeness. A scandal surrounds my father's death, a scandal that I could never allow to be linked with my dear husband's noble family. By your century, however, that scandal will be either forgotten or unimportant, as time always heals such wounds. It will be safe for me to play in public.

"If you please, my friend, take your playback machine to the concert halls and let me play to audiences after so very long. I shall not disappoint them. My good colleague Frederic Chopin always said that I played with the touch of an angel, and surely his opinion is not to be ignored.

"My doctor tells me that I have less than a month to live. Bless you, my friend, for bringing my hands back to life. Bless you and goodbye, from Countess Vaud, and from Katherine Searle."

She concluded the recording with a Chopin nocturne, number 2 in E-flat Major, and you may blame it on my Mediterranean temperament if you like, but I found myself unable to hold back the tears. Gerry had been sitting on the edge of his chair while the disk played, but he slumped back and buried his face in his hands as the last chord faded into the background of hiss and rattles.

"So the friend was us," I said rather stupidly.

He was silent for some time, then he said "The company's going to have to gear itself up for a very unusual promotion campaign."

"For Katherine? Gerry, it's all very well to convince you and me, but what about the Board? They'll never put up the money."

"They will if we withhold the recordings by the famous composers. How about that! She was talking to me-- well, us, at any rate. I think I need to make another phone call to New York."

Now, five years later, it seems amazing that we could have worried about people being interested in Katherine. My own share of the recording profits could pay for a 747 airliner, with plenty left over. The twins have founded a university named after her, and she has been praised by everyone from the President to radical feminist groups. Strangely enough, she has been classed as a great virtuoso of the Twentieth Century, because that is when her public career began. The recordings have also produced an explosion of scholarship on Nineteenth Century music, and on how its great composers intended their works to be played.

I could not have known all of that as the cab drove me away from the Vaud mansion later that morning, but I knew that the reel of tape that I held would cause a sensation in New York. The dawn was breaking as we drove down the Avenue Marceau and across the Seine on the way to Orly Airport, and the sky had cleared during the night, leaving the city clean and gleaming. To my surprise the cab driver was Canadian, and spoke English.

"The start of a beautiful day, eh?" he remarked. "Even in winter the Old Lady can be pleasant sometimes. On mornings like this I always think something marvellous will begin."

I agreed, smiling all the more because today what he said was true. Katherine had challenged Time and Death themselves with her silvered glass disks and clockwork machine, and just when it seemed that she was beaten, along came Rico Tosti and Gerry Searle with their laser pickup heads, digital analysers and computer programs. Tired and proud, like some minor hero in a great legend, I fancied that I was holding hands with the newly awakened Katherine.

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