

explaining (\*!+&#!!) *Rachmaninoff*

or {OR}\_\_\_\_\_or

an *Evening* of **Home Grown ...**

**IMPERIALISM(!)**

By Michael Carter

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *An absorbing virtuoso 'tete a tete au famille' in which spiraling syncopation is squared off against post-Romantic harmonies. Even if you know nothing about jazz or classical music you will drawn into this confrontation that starts adagio and quickly becomes allegro. The author demonstrates not only his knowledge of music but a voice (literary, that is) that rings authentically true and the wisdom that says the family who plays together, stays together. We were so enamoured by this CNF(Cdn. sp) that when he followed a few days later with an off 'the cup' not so decaffeinated micro fiction we snapped it up sooner than you can 'double latte, please.' Maestro...?*

*Five stars*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE** *(for the love of language...)*

But wait. On the horizon, the sacking of Christian Rome by the bebop-loving Germanic throng of heathens who believe in pagan jazz stands lowly, stands as nothing against the new Eastern menace. Invincible. The death of civilization as we know it. The wave of Eastern, oh for the love of gods, the Shaw god and the Goodman god and the Roy Eldridge god. We are lost as the gyrating distillate of pure musical evil rides over the civilized jazz plains destroying all in its path led by Attila the Hun Presley.

*Explaining Rachmaninoff  
or an Evening of Home Grown Imperialism*

“This is the winter of our discontent.” A monkey could have written that.

Classical gray cold skies hover over the house. Dad comes home, jazz-headed, from a piano tuning, home from a grand piano owned by other winter-haters on this sun-hiding day in a Michigan February. A come spring and we'll be joyous and happy and won't complain any more day. They long for summer of quenching their sun-made thirst with cold beer, for the fresh garden vegetable tomato and cucumber and green lettuce days of summer.

As Dad removes his gray flannel coat inside the doorway to the living room, I turn down the volume of a Mozart symphony, but too late. At once I hear that everybody likes young summer not that old stuff, that bone-creaking classical. More. Not that stuff. We want happy. We want jazz. No light shines into the living room with that on. And my father stands wondering, what the hell is that? Turn it down to 1949 just before jazz died of bebop. Be hopped up with heroin ruckus fracas inverted chords destroyed. Where is the tone?

Mom wanders in from the kitchen with a you're going to get a tin ear listening to that stuff. The bop? No no no that stuff. What you listen to. That stuff on the radio. That beethovened old not jazz symphonic. Stuff.

And Dad with, “What is that written in the last century. The last century my God that old stuff composers. You call that music? The seventeenth and eighteenth and nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all that Methuselah-like Beethoven stuff right up to the birth of jazz around 1930.” He wanders into the kitchen, his voice trailing off with the “1930.”

What a thing for a family to argue. How about, hey my kid's got class he listens to the classics my classy kid. Instead, sequestered in the basement he listens to that same old noise we shut the door.

This particular family lives in musical denial. We drink it but deny there's a problem. We are musically dysfunctional. However, this afternoon, my room downstairs is too cold, and the Mozart too good, and the living room too cozy. Together, these elements combine to make this a perfect afternoon for a skirmish, for the elements of our eclectic tastes to rise to the surface.

Dad re-enters the staging area from the kitchen with a cup of coffee and sits across the room on the couch. He continues, “Nineteen-thirty, that's when bands started playing good.” And that's how we begin, with a simple declaration of non-fact.

Usually, at this point I would say, “Yep,” and head downstairs. But something about the delicious other place grayness of the sky that stretches over the horizon into the past brings out:

“What about Bix Beiderbecke, the tuxedoed gentlekid from 1920's Des Moines?”

So, here we go. Immersion. Another confrontational therapy day.

Dad: “He was okay but old. A touch of the Beethoven about him. No Earl Hines there.”

I counter with: "And Louie Armstrong." Hold it.

"He was ahead of his time. He played in the 20's like they did in the 30's."

Dad's six guns blazing blast anybody not playing between the Year of Our Jazzgod, 1930, and the invasion of the Goths bopping into the late 40's. But there are too many of them and not enough bullets and they're soundbullet-proofed anyway because even the jazz public likes Charlie Parker.

But wait. On the horizon, the sacking of Christian Rome by the bebop-loving Germanic throng of heathens who believe in pagan jazz stands lowly, stands as nothing against the new Eastern menace. Invincible. The death of civilization as we know it. The wave of Eastern, oh for the love of gods, the Shaw god and the Goodman god and the Roy Eldridge god. We are lost as the gyrating distillate of pure musical evil rides over the civilized jazz plains destroying all in its path led by Attila the Hun Presley.

And a Dark Age settled on the land that continues through this day. The jazz soldiers have beaten their horns into plough shares, the CD plough share and the digital plough share memories.

Oh merciful. Oh helpless. Heathen mouth of Satan. The world is sad to the ears between the listenings and the remembrance-sharing with a couple of old friends, veterans.

An attempt at conciliation from me. "The nineteen-fifties was the decade that music died. Not the bop. The Presley."

"Yes, Elvis Presley. He destroyed our way of life." An agreement. "Everything that was good in our world. Not the pelvis, not the hair. No, the hillbilly mindless people-grabbing hype of him." (Dad didn't actually use the word 'hype' because the only hype he knew was service buttocks shot hypodermic hype.)

This is not to say that the rage is no longer heard. Arguments bubble up like trapped pockets of gas in decades-old pools of rainwater at the bottom of the glorious golden lode known as the Big Band Era, though it wasn't the big bands he liked so much as the individuals. So, to this day, we parry and thrust and anger and agree on nearly nothing which is next to maybe one point, that we do both like jazz.

Back to therapy.

Dad pronounces, "Like Louie said, 'It's either good or it's bad,'" or something like that and "So I don't know classical because if it's good it's jazz."

Holy mother of Presley the Hun how can I argue with that? I try.

"But Dad you have to call it something. It's music written for a full orchestra using non-jazz chords or for quartets using non-blues chords. To be read."

With the "to be read" Dad looms threatening like one out of the past who can make himself stronger by the mass of years in his hearing.

We square off. The debate begins again. By now I am prepared for any onslaught, but the mass of Dad years blur details, and the assault on my classical sensibilities with his saying move forward to force two golden decades of jazz truth into me.

Dad: "Damn Parker and Monk and Mingus. We would have had another five years before Presley."

We go into the Debussy middle ground where it's safe to tread. No mines to step on. No rocks to climb over. The ground is well lit. And the echoes are not deafening. Yet.

We discuss the war horse we both ride well, the musical conveyance into the twentieth century, the bridge that Claude built, *The Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. And three minutes of lavish, heard time and again over and over agreement, self-congratulatory praise of the wisdom in our masterpiece-liking. We both stand on the 1900 promontory to survey the vast twentieth century waters of Biederbecks s "In a Mist" right out of the mouth of Debussy's chromatic ocean scale. And the beautiful's, the masterpieces, and the gorgeousing continues as we enjoy the last big agreement. Then:

"Yes, but Debussy is jazz."

"Why?" and I know the next.

"If it's good, it's jazz."

"And what, father, of the classical muse?"

"There is no classical music. It's either good or it's not, like Louie said."

"But Dad," I say using "but" as a diversion which leads nowhere because Dad only credits "and," his "and" to charge the argument, to dig further into his point.

"But Dad, we're talking about three or four centuries of composers here." This I have to say. It's like committing the first wave of troops, who will surely be slaughtered, just to probe the enemies weak points. No conscience about this. They die brave polyphonic deaths. The "Ode to Joy" and Mahler's mostly finished *Tenth Symphony* pass through these words along with Mozart's *Requiem* and Bach's every song his twenty-one children played inventively, all these pass by only to be silenced by the following decree:

"They weren't musicians. They only wrote all that stuff." And then we accelerate to our more common speed of disagreement with "Some guy playing a bunch of notes those old guys wrote. That's not music. It's just a bunch of noise."

Seems like how many old times. Dad's rigid view of the world and my break-out of the jazz ghetto view.

"So, Mike, what exactly is your relationship to your father?" asked the ghost writer for *Off Center* magazine. In your own words."

"Well, Swanson, or whatever I want to call yourself, our tie could best be described, musically, as non-symbiotic pan-nihilism with organic overtones. I mean we are related by blood

if not by temperament. Little in common beyond an appreciation for a good, old-fashioned augmented ninth.”

“Can I quote you on that?”

“I doubt it. Here's the part you need to heed. This next part. Swanson? Listening? Of course. Which part? Why the monkey part.”

The monkey part. First, the Steve Allen part. The part that supports Dad's case.

When Steve Allen's show was on late at night in the early 50's, and I was wee tiny in bed, my parents would occasionally bring me to the living room so I could watch a bit to train me in the offbeat ways that would unintentionally screw up my life relative to business sense and social gentility, square things that didn't matter anyway, at least not until they did which was shortly after and forever beyond that. They didn't know this. They only knew jazz. Dad played coronet in clubs on weekends, and this gave meaning to his life.

One night, Steve Allen made the public training remark to illustrate his astuteness, really obtuseness, that one person could strike a key, this as he struck a key on the piano he was sitting at for demonstration purposes in case some were unable to connect the words "striking a key" with the sound striking a key would make, and it would sound different from another person striking the same key. He said this a second time striking the same key again. Awed audience approval.

Home version: “A musician is born, not made. Wheaties plays no part in the building of one. He is natural, born, whole, ready made.” Thus, Dad can have none of this voice training nonsense or composing nonsense or going to Julliard nonsense.

"Like Mozart writing symphonies before he was ten years old."

"No," in a tone to assure me of my ignorance. "He just wrote that stuff. He wasn't a real musician."

"Mozart wasn't a real musician?"

"Of course not."

And we venture into piano music Dad has heard. "Rachmaninoff?" No response. "You know. That great concerto we heard the other night?" I remind him.

"Yeah. That was great jazz."

"So, you liked the music."

"The guy who played it was a musician."

Point. "But he wouldn't have had anything to play if Rachmaninoff hadn't written it in the first place." Pure logic. So obvious. To me.

Counterpoint. "If the guy on piano hadn't been a musician, it would have been junk."

"But the chords were beautiful in themselves."

"Not unless the guy playing them was a musician."

"Some chords are inherently beautiful." Backup. "Like an augmented ninth."

Some give here. "Yes."

Headway, proven by my next argument, my parry to musician-played versus written, another definition, or circumnavigation, of the musician being. Here it is.

Bring in the monkey.

"Okay, Dad. There's an old story about a bunch of monkeys. If you sat them in front of keyboards and they hit keys randomly, over a period of time and generations, by pure coincidence one of them would type out a play by Shakespeare."

"Funny story."

"So, even though it wasn't written by Shakespeare, the play would still be there on paper, and the play would be just as great as if he wrote it himself."

"But that's not music."

"Now if a monkey sat at a piano and hit an augmented ninth, the chord would still sound beautiful. It's a beautiful sound in itself."

"But it would sound better if played by a musician." Steve Allen lives. Were you in the audience? Of course you were. No, you probably gave him the idea.

"How? A chord is a chord."

"If you were a musician you would understand."

"I've listened to thousands of hours of music. Jazz and classical and everything else."

"But you aren't a musician. If you did you'd know what I'm talking about."

Can't argue with that. "Yes, I see your point."

The mood changes and the tension in the air, as tight as an over-stretched bass string, lessens. We slide back into comfortable denial, finished with the old argument for another few weeks. At the table the family eats dinner and talks about anything else.

Postlude.

Later that night, in the basement, a radio broadcast announces the next work, Mahler's uncompleted *Tenth*. I ask Dad for a favor. Would he come to the now warm downstairs to try out some music for fifteen minutes. Even dysfunctional family members like one another. He assents. Only the first movement. Promise. Just before it starts I reassure him of the greatness of the musicians in the New York Philharmonic. We listen. I don't press my luck and turn off the receiver immediately at the end of this section. And? Of course, he loves it. Absolutely.

Comment: "What great musicians. What a great orchestra!"

Conclusion? You can't teach an old musician a new idea.

Conclusion? It doesn't matter.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This piece illustrates an example of a workable dysfunctionality here rendered through the collision of two passionate views of music. My father was a fanatical jazz musician, and when my thinking strayed from his standards of musical good and bad, in my discovery of classical music, a conflict formed. The arguments arising from our opposing*

*viewpoints assigned Dad and I two roles: master and heretic. Conversations like the one in "Explaining Rachmaninoff" were typical, but as irrational and impassioned as they appear, they demonstrate that a family can remain close even while shrouded by the tyranny of taste.*

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