

the
 LONG _____ Wait _____ Until
 _____ THEN

By August _____ Nigro

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

August Nigro's "The Long Wait Until Then" is a love letter to literature and music.

I think that what I love most about this story is that most of its contents are over my head, and I am completely okay with that. My lack of knowledge about organs, traveling choirs singing about Christ, classical music (although not completely lacking in this respect I'm clearly reading someone who knows much more), ballet, cathedrals, or the study of any of these medium's histories did nothing to take away from the pleasure of working with the style and craft of this story.

Our protagonist is a traveling choir member who, while walking through St. Michael's, discovers a man who has not only claimed to have fixed the organ of the cathedral but can play the instrument better, almost angelically better, than anyone they have heard before. Dressed in 17th century garb and looking most out of place, when asked the man impossibly responds that he is, in fact, Johanne Sebastian Bach.

From there, Nigro's story unfolds and we have the opportunity to enjoy and see where the speculation goes. Is he really Bach? Are we crazy for wanting to believe that he is? Is reveling in the simple pleasure of beauty enough to forgo the knowledge that what were witnessing is the impossible right in front of our very eyes? The power of this story lies within its own ability to sit back and play with these concepts.

I would be the first to tell you that I don't necessarily enjoy the "what-if-this-happened" concept of crafting fiction – it's like great, congratulations, you've a clever thought process – but that isn't the case with "The Long Wait Until Then." The structure, simplicity, honesty, and basic pleasure of having the thought of spending a day with a true creator of beauty is enough for me to tell you that you too will leave this story with a lighter heart having experienced some true joy.

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

It was still early enough that we made it back to Hasell Street with little attention to one so strangely attired

from the few people in the streets at this early hour. Upon entering the gate house, however, he pretended to be startled by the sudden appearance of light when I flicked the switch. I decided to continue the charade, and my explanation of electricity and the seventeenth-century furnishings had a calming effect upon him.

The Long Wait Until Then

The spell under which the performance at organ of Saint Michael's Church had cast over me was broken by my perception of the organist; he was dressed in colonial period attire. My first thought was he must be a member of a group who was to perform on period instruments in appropriate costumes. Dressed for a Spoleto performance later that day, he had taken the opportunity of the availability of the instrument to rehearse.

When he reached the end of the cantata, he turned around, saw me, and explained what he was doing there. He spoke in the German language, but it was a dialect I had never heard from my German-born parents or my instructors at school. He was, however, clear enough: he had found himself in the church and could not resist the temptation to try the organ. Despite my perplexity over his accent, I told him, in German, what I thought of his playing.

"You play very well. Are you a professional organist?"

"Yes, my vocation requires me to play the organ."

"Are you the organist here at St. Michael's?"

"No, not here."

"Perhaps, another church in Charleston?"

"Charleston?"

His question surprised me. It seemed he did not know where he was, and, when I recalled he said he had found himself here, I considered if I might have been enjoying the playing of an accomplished pianist suffering from amnesia or an idiot savant who wandered from the institution.

"No, I am the organist at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig."

The last word triggered a connection. He had looked vaguely familiar when I first saw him. I had seen his portrait somewhere. In it, he had much longer hair. Now, I could see he resembled the Johann Sebastian Bach I had seen on CD cases. He's not only a savant, I thought, but one with an inflated ego who thinks he's Bach.

"Although I did not know *where* I was when I began playing, I knew immediately *why* I was here. I had been

summoned to fix the organ. You know, I am often asked to mend organs."

"May I ask your name?"

"Johann Sebastian Bach."

Three questions immediately occurred to me. What do I do now? Should seek help? Should I try to get him to a public place, perhaps a hotel, whose desk clerk could summon the proper authorities?

"I think I have fixed the organ. It is a little different from those I am accustomed to, but I think I managed to correct the sound. You were listening. What do you think? Here, let me play more, and you can render a judgment."

He played a half minute of the opening of the *Toccatà in D Minor*. He stopped abruptly, turned, and asked what I thought.

"I've never heard it played so well."

"Thank you, but that is not the judgment I wish. Have you ever heard this organ sound as good before?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't say. I'm not a member of St. Michael's. I'm not even a resident of Charleston."

"Then what are you doing here, and why are you dressed in your underwear?"

It was obvious to me that he was going to play at being Bach in contemporary Charleston down to the last detail.

"I'm a member of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, and we're in Charleston to sing for the Spoleto Festival."

"The Bach Choir?"

"Yes."

"Are all choir members named Bach?"

"No, the choir is named after Bach because we sing his cantatas and masses."

"Named after me? What church do you belong to?"

"We belong to no church."

"You perform in Coffee Houses?"

"No, we usually perform in churches but not as part of the liturgy."

"You sing only my music?"

I had to admire the act. He did not miss a beat.

"Normally, we do. But later today we're singing not only your -- we're singing not only Bach's Cantatas BWV 4 and 99, but also --"

"BWV? I composed no BWVs."

I decided at that point I would meet him half way.

"Excuse me. We're singing not only *Christ Lag in Todesbanden* and *Mein Herze Schwimmt im Blut*, but also Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu Nostri*."

"You are going to sing Buxtehude?"

"Yes."

"The *Membra Jesu Nostri*?"

"Well, just three parts."

"Where will you sing Buxtehude?"

"In the First Scots Presbyterian Church."

"Where is this church?"

"Just around the corner."

"Good. You will take me there. I once walked over four hours to hear Buxtehude. I think, even in my old age, I can walk a few minutes to hear the *Membra*."

I knew from having observed them on a field trip I had taken as part of a Social Psychology course in college that savants often displayed such dynamic personalities one could quite easily be compelled by their charisma. And so it was with my Bach. I could not say no, and for the moment I lost all concern about seeking help.

I agreed to take him to the concert, but I insisted he first accompany me to the William Rhett gate house, where I was staying as a guest of a fraternity brother who had

recently acquired it and where I could dress him in less conspicuous clothes.

It was still early enough that we made it back to Hasell Street with little attention to one so strangely attired from the few people in the streets at this early hour. Upon entering the gate house, however, he pretended to be startled by the sudden appearance of light when I flicked the switch. I decided to continue the charade, and my explanation of electricity and the seventeenth-century furnishings had a calming effect upon him. While I fixed breakfast, he settled down and noticed the CDs stacked before the player.

He picked up one featuring a facsimile of Haussmann's painting of the master, drew it very close to his eyes, and addressed me excitedly.

"That is me!"

"Oh?"

"What is it?"

By now I had surrendered completely and assumed my appointed role.

"It contains your two cantatas, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*."

"This small package contains transcripts of two compositions?"

"Not transcripts, the music itself!"

He was perplexed such a small object could contain music of two cantatas. After placing our breakfast on the table, I sat him down, begged him to remain calm, inserted the CD, and started the player.

He could not believe his ears nor could he sit still. He strode through the first floor finding nothing, ascended the steps to the bedroom, sitting room, and bathroom. He returned quickly and looked out the windows. Discovering nothing, he sat at the table, closed his eyes, and listened to the music. By the conclusion of the first movement, I had finished my breakfast. His was hardly touched.

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

"A miracle!"

The plumbing seemed less miraculous, and he questioned whether cleanliness and health were compromised by the proximity of the privy to the bedroom. I changed my mind about the necessity of having him don my clothes to accompany me to the concert. I would pass him off as a member of a troupe who performed in costume on period instruments.

Although the primary intention of our walk to First Scots Presbyterian was to have him listen to "his" choir

sing Buxtehude's *Membra*, I had another purpose in mind. I was hopeful church officials would allow him to try the four manuals, 48 registers, and 71 ranks to see what he could do on the largest organ in Charleston. En route, he evinced more interest in the festival than in the environs.

"What other music does this festival include besides Bach and Buxtehude?"

"The Spoleto Festival is more than music. It includes theatre, painting, sculpture, crafts, dance."

"What kind of dance?"

"Ballet."

"Ah, ballet. I have seen this new ballet in French opera in Dresden once or twice. I don't care for it."

"Yes, but the program this evening is different. It features a ballet to music you're quite familiar with."

"Buxtehude?"

"No."

"Telemann?"

"No."

"Then, whose?"

"You'll find out this evening."

"You will take me?"

"Yes."

At First Presbyterian, I procured a ticket and seated him at the end of an aisle next to a young man I was convinced spoke no German. I then sought out one of the church elders and put before him the following proposition. I had a guest, a member of an elite German Baroque ensemble, who was quite an adept organist. Would it be possible, following the conclusion of the today's program, for him to play briefly the best organ in the South?

Seduced by my adjective for his instrument, the elder said the organist was in the house and, if she were willing, he saw no reason why my guest could not have a few minutes on their esteemed organ. While he left to consult with his colleague, I checked the audience and found Sebastian -- the middle name seemed most appropriate to the shadow figure in my custody -- taking full measure of the audience.

The church elder returned with the young, attractive, Miss Summers, who, following introductions, greeted me with the news that Sebastian was welcomed to play the organ, but for no longer than a half hour. I thanked her and left to rejoin the choir.

I don't know if it were the good news from the organist, the presence of Sebastian in the audience, or the opportunity to sing something other than Bach, but our

rendition of Buxtehude's evocation of Christ's crucified body sounded to me exceptionally fine. The applause which followed was long, loud, and led by the strangely attired fellow who stood first and caused almost the entire congregation to rise with him.

At the conclusion of the concert, I dashed to meet Sebastian where I had left him. He had not budged. The church was still crowded with members of the audience lingering to compliment the singers or admire the architecture.

"Come, we must go quickly."

"Go where?"

"To see the largest organ in all of Charleston; would you like to try it?"

"Yes!"

Sebastian could not keep from rubbing his fingers along the mahogany case and maple keyboard. He looked above, behind, and aside the console and turned to inquire where the pipes were. I pointed to the other end of the church and told him they were behind the thistle-designed white grates on the wall opposite. Both he and our hostess looked perplexed.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"He's confused about the distance between the console and the pipes."

"Perhaps, this isn't a good idea."

"No, trust me; you'll not regret this next half hour. Is the organ turned on?"

"No."

"Will you please turn it on?"

She reluctantly sat and flicked the switch, and Sebastian responded, as expected, with the recognition of the similarity of this switch to the one which ignited the lights in the gate house, but perplexed as to what switches had to do with organs. God, he was good!

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

"In the organ?"

"In the organ!"

"Dear Lady, may I sit and try?" he asked.

I interpreted; the hostess rose; Sebastian sat. He began a series of tests pulling out a stop and playing a melodic line on the upper manual. He moved down the console through the other three manuals, in and out of more stops, across several pedals, all the time varying the musical phrases. He concluded by literally "pulling out

all the stops" and filling the church with a resonant, deep blast.

"It has good lungs, yes?"

"Yes," I responded.

"Shall I play something?"

"He asks if he may play a short piece on the organ."

"Only if it takes less than a half hour," Miss Summers answered.

"Please do."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Toccatto and Fugue in D Minor."

He played as brilliantly as he had in St. Michael's. I kept my eyes on Miss Summers and was pleased to see she quickly became as mesmerized by the music as I had been by the musician. When he finished, Sebastian looked towards me, and I simply smiled as I heard an outburst of applause from below.

Summers embraced Sebastian. I looked down from the gallery and discovered a nearly full house. Apparently Sebastian's tests had kept half of the audience inside and summoned most outside back in. When I turned back, I recognized the member of the Spoleto board who had greeted

us upon our arrival in Charleston heading towards the two organists.

I immediately put myself between the board member and Sebastian. Why, you are asking? I don't know why. The official probably had some standing in the community, could no doubt ascertain what asylum Sebastian had fled, and could most definitely take him off my hands. I suppose the answer is that I was not ready to have him off my hands.

I interceded just before the official met Sebastian because the former, somewhat taken aback by the latter's apparel, paused. I introduced myself and then, the official and Sebastian to each other. I followed with my story about the artist of an esteemed German Baroque ensemble on their way to Savannah to perform who had stopped to check out Charleston organs.

"I want to talk to him about performing next year for Spoleto."

"I'm afraid there's not enough time. He must get to Savannah to prepare for his performance early this evening."

"Well, may I have his card?"

I dodged the inquiry by telling Sebastian that Mr. Hathaway had enjoyed his performance very much and hoped he would have the opportunity to hear him play again next

year. Sebastian said he would have to come to Leipzig. I told Hathaway that, dressed as Sebastian was for this evening's performance, he did not have any cards on him but would be happy to take along one of Hathaway's and have his agent get in touch.

Hathaway took a card from his wallet and extended it toward Sebastian. I intercepted it and told Hathaway that I would see Sebastian get in touch but that now we must be on our way. I grabbed Sebastian by the arm, led him down the stairs, and out the church, managing to whisk him past those wanting to congratulate him on his performance.

By the time we returned to the Gate House, I learned it was his wont to take a mid-afternoon nap. I was delighted for the information fit my altered plans. After his success at First Presbyterian and my lie about where he had to be this evening, I could not risk Sebastian's appearing in seventeenth-century garb and being recognized by Hathaway or Summers should they be in attendance at the ballet. There was but one alternative; I had to dress him in my clothes. I decided I would introduce him to the shower; while he napped, I would throw his underwear in the washer and dryer and go purchase the ballet tickets if any were left.

As we entered the house, he was surprised by the cool and dry air inside compared to the increased heat and humidity outside. He stepped out again and back to make certain of the contrast he had experienced. I pointed to the control panel.

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

He shook his head in disbelief.

I brought him upstairs to the reading room, opened the pull-out sofa, told him he could nap there, and introduced him to 21st-century plumbing. Yes, I know, it sounds as though I were beginning to believe my guest was the great Bach, but such was not the case. It just seemed convenient and less complicated to relate to him as though he were, rather than treat every comment and action as a test designed to reveal his true identity.

He learned the lesson of indoor plumbing quickly and was happy to get out of his clothes and into the cooling, cleansing shower. I threw his underwear into the washer, and, after he lay down, left to secure tickets. Not only were there a few left in the orchestra, but two reserved balcony seats had just been canceled. I prefer to watch ballet from the balcony.

When I returned, he was still asleep. I put his clothes in the dryer, and, by the time I had completed refreshing myself, Sebastian was awake and his clothes dry. I laid out a pair of khakis and a short sleeve shirt next to his clean underwear, assuring him such was the appropriate apparel for an evening concert at in Charleston.

Our seats were in the center of the second row of the balcony. The curtain opened on ten women assembled in two rows and dressed in light, soft-white, gym suits. Sebastian leaned over.

"Do you people do everything in your underwear?"

I grinned and directed his attention back to the stage.

The conductor began, and my guest instantly recognized the *Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor*. He smiled to indicate recognition of the music and appreciation of the gesture. He was even more pleased once the dancers began. In the first movement, two ballerinas, accompanied by eight women, personified the two violins. In the largo, a male dancer in simple white t-shirt, black leotards, white socks, and black shoes joined the leading ballerina in an exquisite pas de deux. Then, the ensemble lithely expressed the rhythmic vitality of the concluding allegro.

I spent half my time watching the dancers and half enjoying Sebastian become increasingly enthralled by the performance. When the ballet was complete, he led the audience in a rousing standing ovation. We then withdrew outside for the intermission.

"You liked the ballet?"

"Very much! Tell me, who is responsible for the dance?"

"Balanchine, a Russian named George Balanchine."

"I would like to compose for this Russian."

"Oh, why?"

"He not only heard my music, but also felt and understood it. And his dancers interpreted the music as I have never seen it interpreted. You know my music, sacred or profane, is intended as a glorification of the creator who gave me the gift of composition. I did not think it possible to glorify God through the movement of the human body, but this Balanchine --"

"And Bach!"

"This Balanchine and I have done that, here tonight, have glorified God in both sound and dance."

"Shall we return to see the other ballet?"

His answer accorded with my own feeling.

"If you do not mind, I prefer not to. I would rather just walk and relish what I have just witnessed."

I too wished to rehearse what I had just seen. He had in mind what he had beheld on stage, but my recollection would be of Sebastian's viewing the music expressed as Bach himself had never. Mine was an image of the holy rapture of one member of the audience.

"My friend, I want to thank you for a most enriching day. I have learned and enjoyed a great deal today."

"It was my pleasure."

"But now I must retire for, despite my nap, I am very weary and have much to do tomorrow."

"What have you to do tomorrow?"

"I must return home."

I immediately wondered what his last statement meant and continued to do so as we walked the rest of the way in silence. After our arrival in the gate house, I bid him goodnight, showed him how to turn off the light in his room, and retired to my own. I lay in bed considering what I should do on the morrow. I knew it was my duty to seek help for him and help return him to whatever home he belonged, but I was reluctant to do so and wondered if I might not keep his company for one more day. I decided to sleep on it and act in the morning. I finally drifted off

in the middle of recalling the fantastic day I had experienced.

When I awoke, he was gone! I discovered the pull-out bed back in its casing and the room empty. I quickly pulled on some shorts and sneakers and ran to the end of the driveway, looked in both directions, saw nothing, and returned to the house. Within, I initially found no sign Sebastian had spent the night or even the day. His clothes were gone, and mine were piled neatly on a chair. I resigned myself to his absence and prepared my breakfast. Sitting at the table in the dining room, however, I noticed something sticking out from under the CD player. I retrieved the note, brought it to the table, and read the dated German script.

"My good friend!

Thank you again. I have enjoyed your time in Charleston and invite you to enjoy my time in Leipzig.

I will look for you next summer.

Aufwiedersehen,

Sebastian."

I began the rest of the day with a visit to St. Michael's, hoping I would find a trace of Sebastian. Finding the gate open, the side door ajar, and music coming from the organ loft, I entered but discovered only the

church organist in an actual rehearsal. When he looked up and saw me, he confided to the stranger before him his great discovery.

"It's healed itself!"

"What?"

"The organ!"

"The organ?"

"That's the only way I know to put it. It's a fine new reconstruction, and we've found it for the most part a great improvement on the old one.

"But for some reason the renovation always has been a bit wanting in its timbre, just a bit too piercing. But not any more!"

"Perhaps someone has repaired it. Had you sent for anyone to examine it?"

"Someone came a week ago, and, when he was done, said it was as good as he could get it. And it wasn't bad. But this -- "

He quickly ran his fingers and feet over a manual and through the pedals.

"This is much better. It's healed itself."

I left the miracle in the hands of the organist and, later, with the help of officers at the local police station, discovered none of the caretakers in the city or

the county could report any patients missing yesterday from their institutions.

Who was Sebastian? From where did he come? To where had he gone? I certainly had not dreamt it for throughout the day the city buzzed with talk of the unknown musician who had played the organ at First Presbyterian. When I showed up at rehearsal later that afternoon, our conductor informed us we had been invited to perform next summer at several churches throughout Germany, including St. Thomas in Leipzig. My response was ambivalence -- joy in the anticipation of traveling there, but disappointment in the prospect of the long wait until then.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"The Long Wait Until Then,"* grew out of my summer visit to the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. There I had the privilege of hearing a concert featuring a selection from the canon of Johann Sebastian Bach by a chorus standing below and in front of the pipes of the largest organ in the city and later seeing a ballet danced to the music of Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor. I was moved to imagine what a member of the Bethlehem Bach Choir might have thought had he run into a German-speaking organ tuner who identified himself as J. S. Bach. From this conjunction of music, dance, and imagination issued the fiction which celebrates the universality of Bach's music from the perspective of the fantasy genre. Having been an English Professor for many years, my short story style is no doubt an ecumenical confluence of the styles of many English and American short story writers.

AUTHOR BIO: August Nigro was educated at the Universities of Fairleigh Dickinson, Miami, and Maryland and has taught for the Universities of Miami, Maryland, Niagara, and Kutztown. At Kutztown, he was recognized thrice for excellence in teaching.

He is the recipient of three NEH grants for post-graduate study at Claremont College, Berkeley, and Yale; four NEH grants to teach American high school educators at Oxford University; and a USIA grant to teach foreign educators at Kutztown University.

Nigro is the author of three books, *The Diagonal Line*, *The Net of Nemesis*, and *Wolfsangel: A German City on Trial*, the last of which led to the only memorial in Germany to American fliers killed by German citizens during WW II. At the unveiling of the memorial, he gave the keynote speech.

He also has had six short stories – *Beneath the Waters of the Windrush*, *Epiphany in Venice*, *Holland Tunnel*, *Movie Clips*, *Pinnacle Peak*, and *The Woman in Emerald Green* -- published in the United Kingdom and seven one-act plays -- *Early Though the Laurel Grows*, *Identity Theft*, *Lucine*, *The Piano Lessons*, *The Madonna of Inzing*, *Mengele in Budapest*, *What's the Matter* -- and one full length play -- *The Long Shadow* -- produced or read at regional theaters in the United States and Canada. His screenplay, *Wolfsangel*, based on his book, was read at Towson University.

Nigro resides with his wife, Ruth, in Allentown, PA, where they raised three children -- Amy, Augustine, and Jonathan -- and have enjoyed their four grandchildren -- Emma, Caroline, Abigail, and Maria.