A History of Auditory Hallucination

It all began when the Austrian psychiatrist received a letter that caught his attention from the National Library of Argentina in Buenos Aires. In this letter the Argentinian librarian, who claimed to have little interest in music (he always preferred quiet), had written furiously, "I simply cannot continue to endure these beautiful melodies!" From the letter's confused phrasing and the crinkled surface its author's tears had made of its pages, the psychiatrist concluded that his correspondent was suffering from a psychological disorder that resulted in severe auditory hallucinations, likely caused by epilepsy or some other organic mental abnormality. However, any specific diagnosis or treatment could only be determined after a thorough examination, so in his perfunctory but polite response the psychiatrist wrote, "I suggest you consult your local hospital. Please do remember to check your insurance coverage."

But this did little to diminish the librarian's zeal for sending letters describing his experiences of auditory hallucination. His second letter was far more coherent than the first, as if it was written by someone else entirely, and from it the psychiatrist learned more about his correspondent's life. The librarian had grown up in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, loved football, was left-handed, and was a good defender. He had his first wet dream one afternoon at the age of nine. He was circumcised. Later, poor eyesight prohibited him from becoming a professional footballer – but he wondered if it might have had more to do with the fact that he had fucked the wife of his coach who he suspected had subsequently worked behind the scenes to scupper his footballing career. As a result, he had ended up working in a library. He did not, however, dislike his occupation, being someone who "takes great pleasure in categorising chaos." He was born with the Sun in Virgo. He liked Japanese cuisine and hated Spanish food because "it's too chaotic," to which the psychiatrist responded in his reply, "In that case, I strongly suggest that you try Chinese food. It might change your impressions of Spanish cuisine."

As a result of delays in international mail (another small war in the Middle East that brought with it fluctuating prices to the crude oil market and corresponding disarray to the mail network), the third and fourth letters arrived at roughly the same time. The third letter was in the chaotic style of the first, disjointed and barely intelligible, emanating from its pages a disorder that aroused in the psychiatrist a keen sense of his correspondent's suffering. He was after all a man who supposedly despised chaos. The fourth letter, on the other hand, was surprisingly restrained. In it, the librarian gave a systematic and rational account of the piece of music he kept hearing in his head. His writing was both precise and inventive, no word was superfluous, and one could almost hear the melodies from his descriptions of them. It was hard to believe that it was written by a man with no passion for music. How could someone without a certain sensitivity to music be so able to endow it with a second life through language? The psychiatrist continued to patiently reply, "I hope it is possible that one day I will understand your pain."

If this man really knew nothing about music, the psychiatrist concluded, he was at least a truly talented writer. Nevertheless, he decided that this would be the last time he responded to the librarian's letters.

A few days later, the affair recurred to the psychiatrist as a potential source of conversation material during dinner with his wife. They were eating fish, which meant that dinner was lasting a little longer than usual, and he found himself awkwardly running out of things to talk about. It was at this moment that he suddenly remembered the story of the failed-footballer-turned-librarian and his case of auditory hallucination. He skipped over some of the irrelevant details (like the man's circumcision) and focused mainly on the librarian's gift with words. The psychiatrist's wife was a young piano tutor and was naturally very passionate about music, which was an indispensable part of her life. Unfortunately, almost everyone in Vienna felt the same way and she had been unable to make great strides in the music scene. She listened in wonder to the librarian's story.

"So there are really people in this world who can't stand music?" she asked.

"No, darling, the music of auditory hallucination is not the music you imagine it to be."

"You're saying it's horrible music?"

"It's arguably not even music. What most people hear is just a jumble of musical fragments. Perhaps 'noise' is more accurate."

"But his descriptions suggest otherwise."

"Yes, my love, but you know how patients like to exaggerate their symptoms."

"But darling, were you not just praising the precision of his writing?"

Throughout the discussion, their tone resembled that of lovers whispering sweet nothings to one another.

The couple's minor disagreement had finished by the time pudding was served. Luckily, pudding that day was a piece of chocolate, which meant a swift mouthful was all that was required to bring dinner to a close. Later that night, the psychiatrist was examining a brain stem section in the laboratory when his wife shared the story of the auditory hallucinations with her lover in bed. Her aim in doing so was to bemoan her husband's usual officiousness and lack of romantic temperament, flattering by contrast the man by her side who had just provided her with such comprehensive satisfaction. Her lover was a famous orchestra conductor in Vienna, a man with both a passion and talent for music, which in turn imbued him with a certain charisma. The psychiatrist's young wife was only one of many such women in the conductor's life, but he treated all his lovers with great respect and affection, at least for the few hours they were together, during which he would commit body and soul to the task at hand, making when required pledges of eternal love, most of which sprinkled with profanity. The reason he could treat all these women this way was that he didn't love them. What concern was it of his, when standing on stage commanding an entire orchestra, that his own instrument had been subject to the orchestrations of a few women? He only feigned interest at first as the psychiatrist's wife recounted the affair, but as the story progressed he found himself listening more attentively to what she was saying. For some time after she had finished the story (which in her telling was no more than ten sentences long) he sat motionless, his mind seemingly elsewhere, so that it was all she could do to get out of bed and make preparations for returning home. As she rolled up her stockings and was about to attach the suspenders, it was as if he was suddenly struck by a moment of divine revelation.

"Maybe he could find a way to play the music in his head?"

It took her a while to realise what he was talking about. "I suspect he's one of those poor souls who can't play a musical instrument."

"Well he could at least sing it," the conductor promptly replied.

Perhaps it was his outstanding conduct in bed that evening that spurred on the psychiatrist's wife. There was something strangely alluring about his final outburst; it had arrived so abruptly, without explanation, that she found herself anxious to fulfil his desire. The next afternoon, she brought a slice of Sacher Torte from the Sacher Café to her husband at work, before casually asking him:

"Would I be able to have a look at those letters from the librarian?"

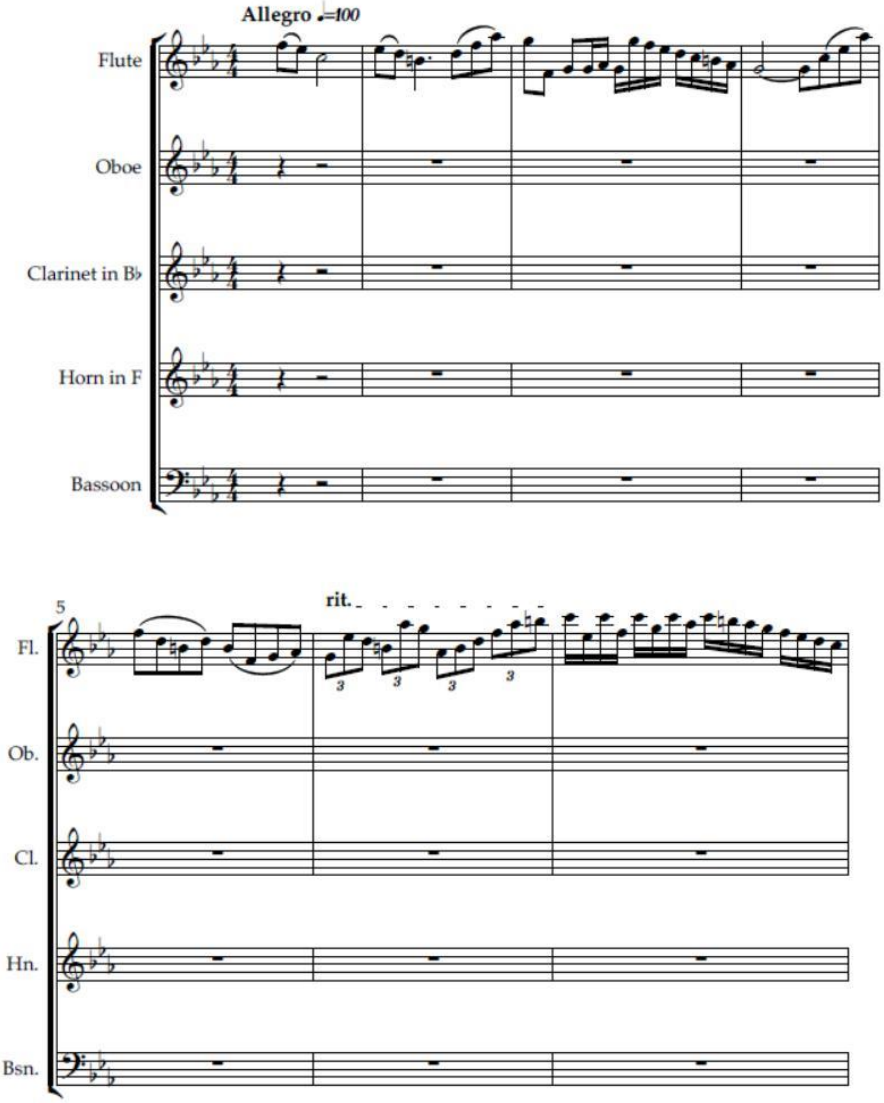
The psychiatrist had no choice but to agree to her request. Although it was clear to him that there was something out of the ordinary about his wife's visit that day, he could find no reason to refuse. Furthermore, he had an important matter to attend to and had to make short work of the Sacher Torte before it contaminated his office. As he consumed the cake, his wife made a note of the librarian's address. When she got home, she imitated her husband's handwriting and wrote a letter to the librarian asking him if there was any way of replicating the music he was hearing in his head. "I have a friend who is an accomplished musician. He would very much like to listen to the melodies you are hearing and see if they truly exist or are only in your mind. This information is essential to clarifying the cause of your disease." She included her lover's address in the letter, which was very brief because of her rudimentary Spanish.

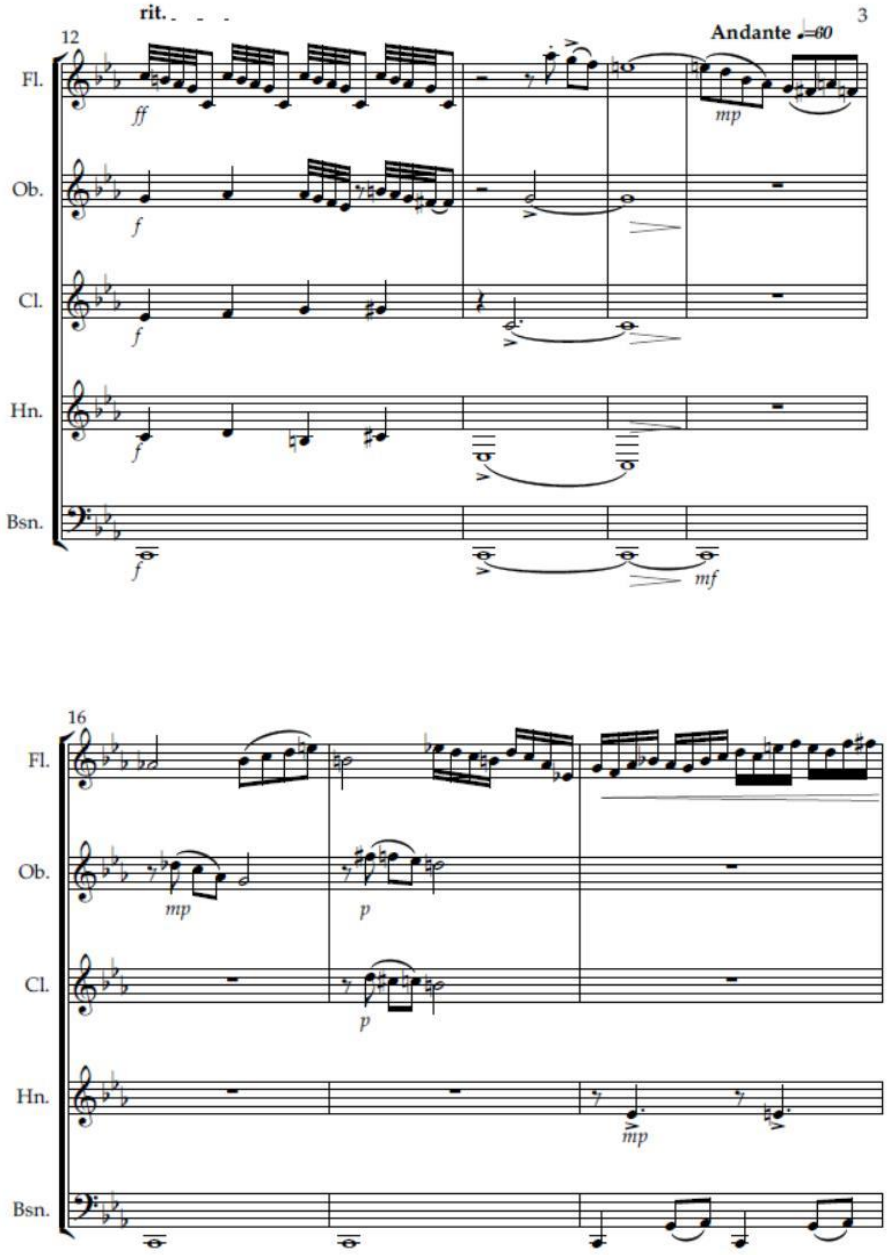
For some time, there was no response from the librarian in Buenos Aires. Before long the three of them had completely forgotten the affair and life went back to normal. The psychiatrist's wife continued to spend her Sunday evenings at the conductor's house and the psychiatrist took frequent trips to the suburbs to visit a certain patient whom he provided with treatment. This particular patient was exceptionally beautiful, but the psychiatrist made efforts to ignore this fact. During their consultations, as he recorded the content of her dreams, the cuckoos made plaintive cries outside the window.

Half a year later, a letter arrived in the conductor's mailbox. He had just returned from Budapest having completed there a series of three concerts, and despite being physically exhausted, he was feeling exuberant. He blithely tore open the letter to reveal a page of dense Spanish, which only served to extinguish his interest in its contents. He put it to one side before turning on his sound system and letting the glory of Abbado wash over him as he settled into the soft, toasty sofa. As fatigue began to take hold, he picked up the letter on the table, hoping to give it a brief look before going to bed. He skipped the first page and discovered that the remaining pages were filled with symbols he could understand. Astonished, the conductor rapidly read the eight pages before him, giving voice to their contents in his head as he went.

Those pages looked something like this:

La Busca de Averroes

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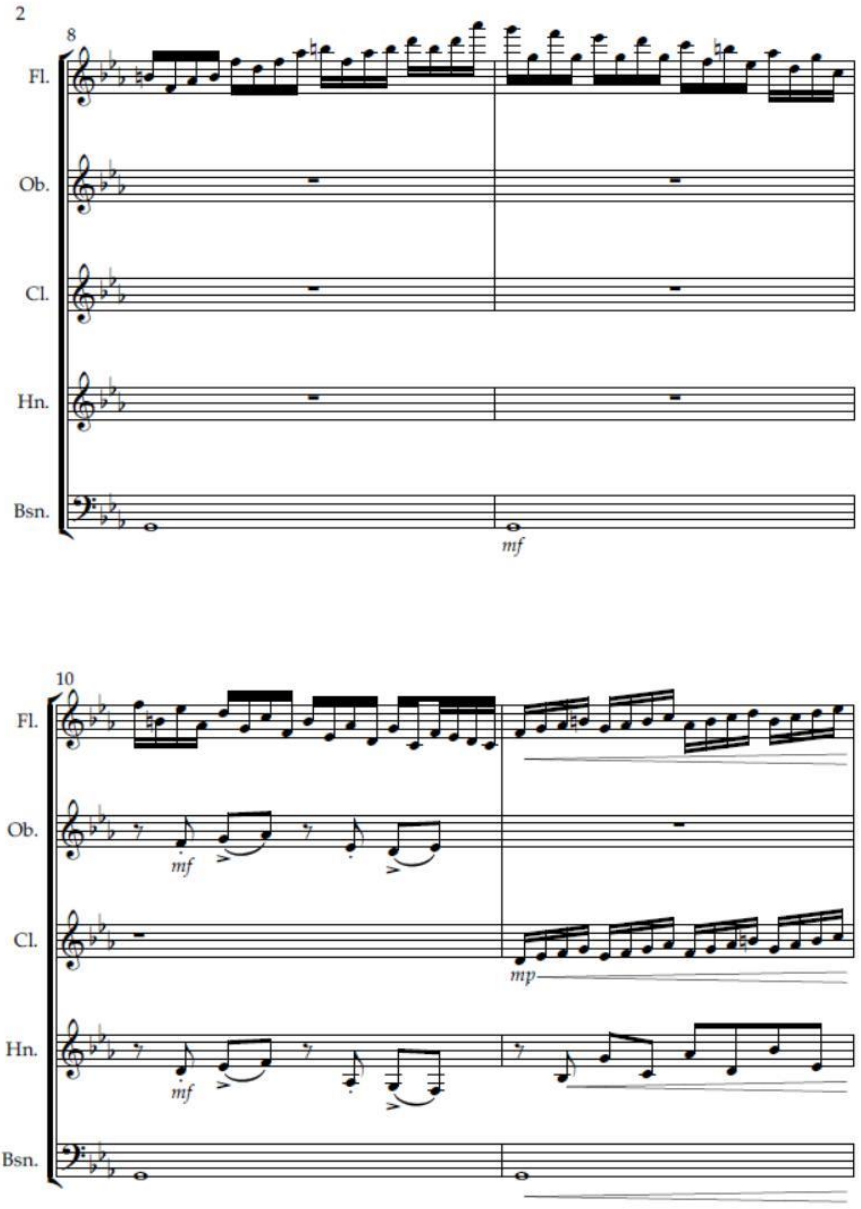
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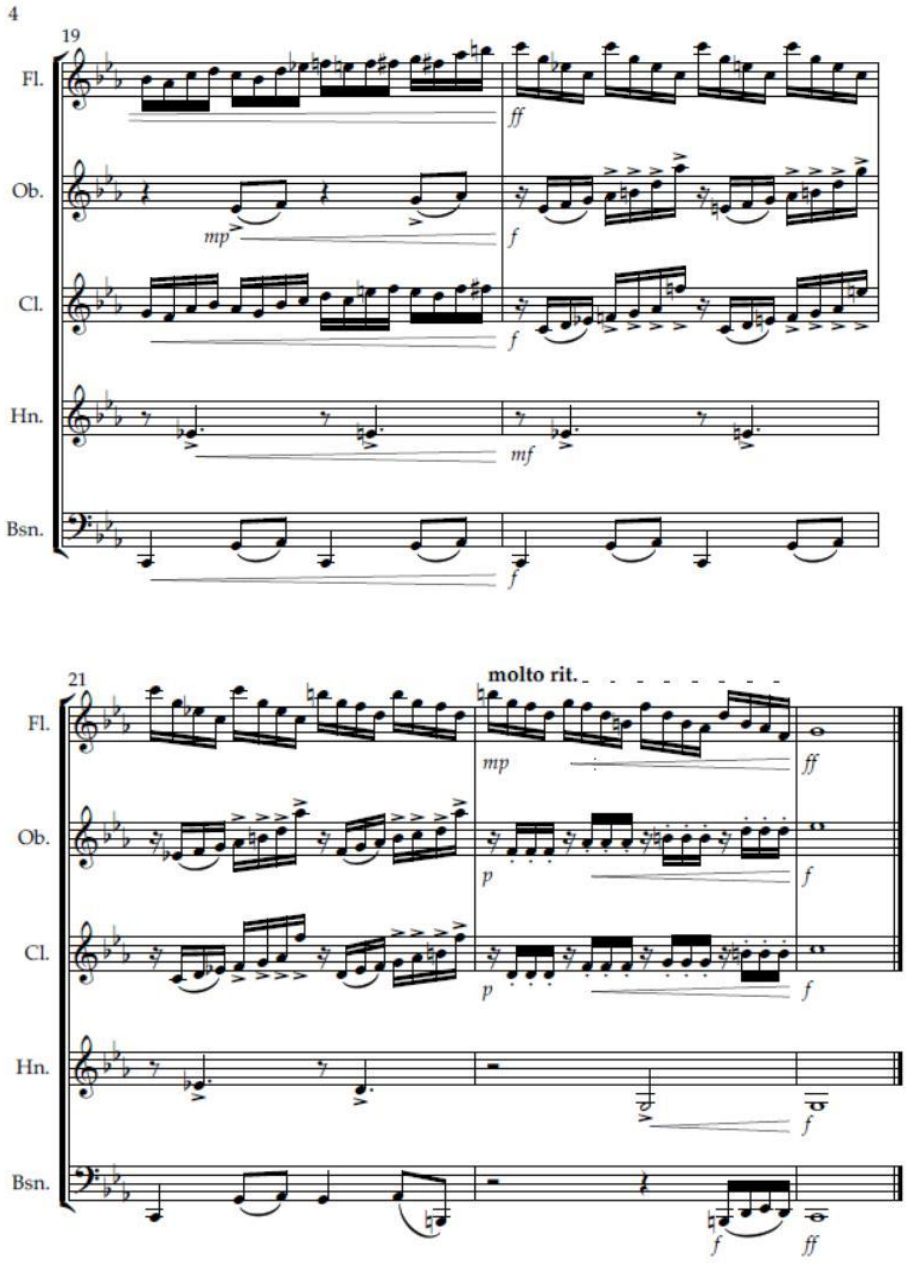

As you can see, it is an eight-page musical score.

He did not wait until Sunday evening when he would be meeting the person whose actions had brought about this state of affairs but took the letter straight to his neighbour's house and knocked on the door. His neighbour was a Jewish man who had once lived in Barcelona and could speak fluent Spanish. He was intelligent and someone who could be relied upon, which is to say, when it came to sensitive matters, he could be as tight-lipped as a priest. The conductor's neighbour explained to him the contents of the letter's first page. It turns out the librarian had spent around half a year learning musical theory in order to write down the music he was hearing in his head. That's right. He hadn't tried to sing it. Instead, he had found a way to transpose it into musical notation. "I've done my best, but I can't guarantee every note is completely accurate."

The conductor was sure he had never heard anything like it. He was, as his lover had written in the letter, a man with a thorough knowledge of music history. He was convinced that if someone had written such a captivating piece of music, he would have heard of them.

The conductor was a man with the keen senses of a cheetah, and he realised that he was facing perhaps the greatest turning point in his life. His career up to this point was far from lacking in distinction, but he was certain that now, with this score in his hands, his life going forward would not simply build smoothly upon what had preceded it but leap into a completely new stratum. Three days later, the conductor met with the librarian in Café Tortoni in Buenos Aires. Note how when the significance of a situation is sufficiently appreciated by one of the parties involved, externalities like Middle Eastern wars and administrative incompetence can be disregarded allowing the plot to develop at lightning pace. We need not concern ourselves with the particulars of their spirited discussion – how they dealt with the language gap, how they gained each other's trust, the nature of the mutually beneficial relationship they established and so on. When the main thread of a plot has acquired enough tension, such trifles are of little importance. Ten days later, the conductor returned to Europe with a thick stack of sheet music manuscripts. He refused all concerts and social events, which naturally included his liaisons with lovers, and shut himself in his house studying the manuscripts day and night with little regard for food or sleep. By the time he had emerged onto the streets of Vienna in early spring, three lovers had left him, a few contracts had fallen through, and the dozen or so pounds of body mass he had lost made him resemble an addict from the dregs of society. The conductor didn't care. He knew he was on the brink of a vast triumph.

The conductor announced that in three months he would put on a concert of great importance. Despite the fact the announcement contained only the time and place, and no details of the piece to be performed, the concert sold out immediately.

To prevent the disclosure of any details about the music to be played, rehearsals took place only at the dead of night and in the mind of the composer. He feared that were a single note to be leaked to the outside world, it might reveal the nature of this gift from God. His fear was not without grounds. God had not after all bestowed this gift upon him directly. To say he had forced this music from the arms of her rightful sweetheart would not be completely accurate, but to say that their entanglement was mere serendipity would be to downplay the extent to which he had contrived this outcome. The conductor had given little consideration to the question of who should be credited with composing the piece. With the results of the concert as yet uncertain, the question remained ambiguous. Furthermore, he was completely engrossed in rehearsals. He had neither the time nor inclination to consider such secular matters. His guardedness meant that none of the musicians saw a score prior to the concert. He appreciated the capability of each performer and put all his faith in their talent: "We don't need to rehearse. We must get it right first time. We can only get it right first time."

Three months later, the concert took place in the Vienna Golden Hall for an audience that included the psychiatrist and his wife. Before the performance began, the psychiatrist was still complaining to his wife about the detrimental impact Anna Freud was having on his profession.

"They just need meds! They shouldn't be wasting so much time exploring their childhood."

His wife responded with a graceful smile, the outline of a tall, slim figure reflected in her eyes.

The prelude to the four-act symphony opened with three fiery chords which reappeared intermittently throughout the performance to mark moments of emotional transition in a manner that evoked courage and confidence. The whole piece was densely textured, with each melody interspersed with flurries of counterpoint. The clarinet and bassoon, at times resembling a pipe organ, provided the piece with elegant impetus as polyrhythms and polymetres snaked through the piece to give the performance an otherworldly quality. The orchestra had come together perfectly, vindicating the conductor's faith in their talent and capability. He was right. They hadn't needed to rehearse. Just like the conductor himself, when the players picked up their

instruments and began reading the piece before them for the first time in their lives, they too were absorbed: it seemed less that these musicians were playing a piece and more that the piece had commandeered their bodies to complete an act of self-expression. At this moment, it was the music itself that had come to life.

As the final note faded away, a giddy stupor washed over the conductor. He had to stand still with his eyes closed for some time before regaining composure. When he tried to wipe the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, he discovered it wasn't sweat that dripped from his face but tears. He realised he was gripped by a profound sorrow, as if aware that he'd seen the sun for the last time. Every musician in the orchestra was similarly moved by the piece's supernatural power. Unlike the conductor, they had not seen the whole score prior to the concert. Only when the final note had sounded that evening in the Golden Hall had they finally, in the role of both performer and listener, heard the wondrous piece in its entirety.

When the conductor had pulled himself together he turned around and bowed towards the audience. Only when he had straightened up to face them did he notice the expressions of astonishment on the audience's faces. There was no applause, no cheering. At first he assumed that like him they were simply stunned into silence by the heavenly music they had just heard.

"Is this some kind of joke?" someone mumbled angrily. He had spoken quietly, but the impact of his exclamation rippled through the audience

"Do you take us for fools?!" came the second voice.

Having confirmed that they were not alone in their assessment of the performance, that they hadn't misconstrued something, the audience began to get up and leave. The only clapping that could be heard came from a left-wing art critic. Later, when the conductor saw the critic's review in a newspaper, he realised that the critic had interpreted the performance as a postmodern parody of contemporary bourgeois aesthetics. "Peter Handke advocates offending the audience. I say just let them sit there and wait!"

The audience's reaction was completely understandable. They hadn't heard a thing. The whole concert had taken place in the orchestra's imagination.

The conductor refused to believe what had happened. He quickly organised a second concert. Some of the original audience members dutifully made a second appearance; a few curious newcomers also attended, having heard news of what had happened at the first concert. Most assumed the second concert would be an apology, that they would finally be able to hear real music, the sounds of violins, trumpets and kettledrums. But the second concert was no different from the first, a symphony of silence. The audience were livid.

The conductor never got another chance to prove that this great symphony truly existed and was not simply a figment of his imagination – or someone else's imagination. Before that summer had come to an end, he died in a car crash. Of course, this was simply an excuse. By this point he had already died of a broken heart. The psychiatrist's wife quickly found a new lover, the Golden Hall continued its rotation of performances, and the exploits and existence of this ambitious composer were swiftly forgotten in Vienna.

A few years later, a young music historian from Berlin arrived at a cemetery in the outskirts of Vienna in the hope of visiting the conductor's grave. His search proved fruitless and the disappointed young man had no choice but to place his hastily bought tulip by a random grave, if only to leave a mark of his visit. Before this he had already travelled to Mongolia, South Africa, Algeria and China collecting data for his PhD thesis, which was titled *A Review of the Non-Existent Music in Modern Auditory Hallucinations*. The first sufferer of auditory hallucinations he had encountered was his grandmother. Unlike the librarian from Buenos Aires, his grandmother took great pleasure in the music that existed only in her mind: "It's the reason I never feel alone." For twenty years after her husband died, she never shared her secret with anybody, but in her last moments lying in bed with lung cancer, she sang the melodies she was hearing in her head. The young man couldn't hear a thing she was singing but he saw the touching expression on her face. He believed that only a profoundly moving piece of music truly sounding in the depths of his

grandmother's soul could explain the childlike joy that shone from her eyes. A glimmer of hope suddenly appeared in the young man's formerly aimless academic career. He saw a path that no one had ever seen before.

He spent the first couple of years of his PhD digging through historical archives trying to find in the profusion of documents any trace of non-existent music. He also studied neuroscience and psychopathology, consulted a wide range of clinical cases, visited famous professors and interviewed patients in an attempt to extrapolate a common cause for the music being hallucinated. But the results were disappointing. He gradually discovered the truth that even if these musical passages did exist, they existed only in the minds of a chosen few and could never manifest in the external world. The people who heard such music could do nothing but leave it be and listen. This was the best way of treating it. It was the only way of treating it. The historical records showed that anyone under this music's spell who recklessly tried to give it expression ended up mad or dead. It was the music of heaven, the voice of God, which had slipped unbeknownst into the human world.

The young man eventually arrived in Buenos Aires to visit the librarian who he was surprised to discover was a blind old man. "It's just cataracts," said the man who was still employed by the library; by this point he was sufficiently familiar with the building in which he worked: "I don't really need my eyes." They discussed music and the librarian told him that after studying music theory he learned to appreciate the pleasure of listening to music. "Now we can get along peacefully together." He twisted his index finger into his temple and said, "Of course, I prefer Brahms, but it's not too bad to listen to once in a while." The librarian knew nothing of what had happened to the Austrian composer who had come to visit him a few years before. He had always thought the only purpose for putting the music on paper was to provide information for the psychiatrist studying his disease. The young man thought it best not to trouble the librarian with the news of the conductor's death. "We exchanged quite a few letters before I lost my sight," the librarian said. "His Spanish was surprisingly fluent." The young man decided it was not in his interest to explore this question any further. He used what cash he had left to pay for dinner and bought a flight back to Berlin.

After finishing his PhD thesis he hurriedly submitted it to the academic committee at the university and decided to go for a walk on Museum Island. It was an autumn evening in Berlin. If you went out you were bound to meet a girl.

The academic committee were confounded by the thesis they had received. Only the most experienced amongst them cracked a peculiar smile and said he had come across something similar while teaching at another university.

Each of the thesis's hundreds of blank pages were blank, except for the final page on which was written but a single sentence:

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[1]

[1] The eight-page musical score that features above was written by my friend Stephen Nashef and I would like to thank him for providing this story with a piece of "non-existent" music. This story was first written in 2017 and at the time I used a Brahms score I found on the internet, thinking to myself that no one would be able to tell where it came from. Later the story was published in *Xihu* magazine, then reprinted in *Overseas Digest*. One evening, I received a phone call from someone I didn't know who asked me if I was the author of "A History of Auditory Hallucination". I said I was. The person went on to ask why I had used a Brahms score – wasn't it supposed to be a piece of non-existent music? I was shocked, but the guy on the other end of the line seemed sincere. I had to explain that, yes, it should be an original score that appears in the story, but the problem was I didn't know a thing about music, did I? It took a while to get him to understand: the score was just there to be a score, that was all. Finally, he responded by telling me that writing was something to be taken seriously – you couldn't just blithely write about something you didn't know anything about. Who was this person? It turns out he was the chief editor of *Overseas Digest* – a man who knows a thing or two about music and composes his own pieces. I was inspired, or at least provoked. Two years later, I started learning piano with a teacher, but I still couldn't write the "music of heaven" this story required – if I'd gotten good enough to do that within three years, I'd have given up writing.

15th March, 2017

Luckily, I have a friend who is familiar with music called Stephen Nashef. I asked him if he'd compose me a piece for this story and he readily agreed. This is the origin of the score that features in this story.