2009 Honorable Mention Personal Narrative/Essay

Sing Me To Heaven

“In my heart’s sequestered chambers
Lie truths stripped of poet’s gloss.
Words alone are vain and vacant,
And my heart is mute.”

My textbook tells me “… music is simply a pleasure seeking behavior that exploits one or more existing pleasure channels that evolved to reinforce an adaptive behavior, presumably linguistic communication.” We learned in sociology that without language, we could not form thought, make connections, develop relationships or be at all our idea of human. Darwin calls music the “evolutionary parasite” of language. An irrelevance. Logic agrees: it serves no biological purpose. Music is basically a leisurely time filler, furthering no one in his or her fight for survival. The amygdala and cerebellum respond archaically to the pulsing neurons for no reason. To some it is background noise. It is an ignored filler of space that leaves us vulnerable to silence when empty.

“If you would comfort me, sing me a lullaby.”

My parents did, nearly every night of my childhood years until I was 12. They filled the deep quiet of night with singing angels watching over my sleep, keeping at bay the scary specters that would try to creep in unbidden.
I am cozy in bed after a busy five-year-old day filled with kindergarten’s safety scissors, PBJ sandwiches, and barefoot giggles in the backyard. My dad kneels on the floor near my bed next to my mom, and leans his arms across my legs. The weight makes me feel safe.

“What song do you want tonight, Brookley?” He peeks up at my sister on the bunk above, “Or you, Adrienne?”

We both talk over each other with the names of our standard favorites. It doesn’t matter what we say anyway: we will get to hear them all, same as we do every night. They start off with ‘Cockles and Mussels,’ pause for a moment, and move to ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ Adrienne and I chime in with our primary-trained voices, trying to keep up with Mom’s harmony, but always we revert back to the pull of the melody that is ours to hold. Dad’s gentle bass, and Mom’s sweet soprano come in sound waves of contentment, making my blinks last longer. With my heavy eyes closed, I keep squeezing Dad’s hand to make sure he doesn’t really think I’m asleep. I don’t want them to stop singing.

“In response to aching silence
Memory summons half-heard voices,
And my soul finds primal eloquence and
Wraps me in song, wraps me in song.”

Without music, I would be as good as mute. Somehow it is an expression that wrenches my soul from my body and lifts me to a new level of consciousness. Rapture, despair, comfort, and joy, I feel in thrills and chills pressing into me with a thousand times more force than I should logically be feeling someone else’s emotions. But they become my own. I frequently turn off all the lights, close my eyes, and lay spread eagle on the luxurious living room carpet, allowing the full roundness of sound to seep under the cracks of my eyelids, trickle through tendrils of my hair, and permeate every pore. Bass ripples through my chest. I catch my breath, because any outside noise as irrelevant as my breathing would be an obstructing boulder in the perfectly dancing flow of a stream, or a stone shattering the glassy surface of a pool.
Andrea Bocelli to The All-American Rejects, Rachmaninoff to Ragtime, Ingrid Michaelson to Igor Stravinsky, Dashboard Confessional to Disney, Puccini to Poulenc. These are living in my collection. I have it all. Well not all. Otherwise, I would stop this slippery slope towards bankruptcy that occurs with repeated use of the innocent ‘Buy Song 99c’ button that glares next to the unsatisfying 30-second preview of a song. I cringe as I read the totals on my receipts. But I never regret it. It’s like those MasterCard commercials to me. I don’t know exactly what the precursory elements would be, but my music collection is priceless. The variety of composers, artists, and genres reflects me like a many faceted mirror, each surface echoing a version of me that sometimes even I don’t recognize. My obsession with Broadway showtunes. The timeless classic rock bands. My collection of Gregorian chants. The EP’s of underground artists. Electronica techno. My opera music, neatly organized by composer and work. Who knows the underlying psychological reasons behind each? But they are all bits of my soul. My mom jokes that I can name any one of the thousands of songs on my iTunes within 3 seconds of it starting on shuffle. I’ve tried it, and it’s true. I can.

I wait for the parts of music that make me ‘just DIE.’ I always say ‘just DIE’ when I attempt to explain how I feel, because it seems impossible to find the right words. But those motives and themes that I am talking about actually make me want to do the exact opposite. I want to live! I want to fling my arms wide and embrace the omnipresence of life and emotion, so significant, vast, and moving.

I still don’t know if others feel the same way as I do. My reaction to music is irrational. Sometimes I try to pick people’s brains and ask them about music, but I usually recieve an apathetic response. Does it make them feel the way I do? Could it, if they listened, instead of allowing it to crowd around the air about their ears? My ears drink thirstily. I am unable to concentrate on anything but the rhythm counterpoint to the beating of my heart, and the lyrical pull of sound succession.

“If you would win my heart, sing me a love song.”
On a Friday, after one of those late-night ice cream dates characteristic of my high school years, my then-boyfriend turned to me and said, “Tonight is the night you are going to learn to ballroom dance.”

Despite my valid protests about my lacking dance ability, he parked his car smack in the middle of the deserted recreational center parking lot that overlooked the mountains, lit by dim streetlights that seemed to only accentuate the brilliance of the stars. I remained obstinately in my seat, determined not to make a fool of myself, as he walked around the car, opening all the doors as he made his way over to my side. I folded my arms stubbornly as he reached across me in the passenger’s seat to grab his iPod. He pressed play and circled his thumb so the music grew louder and louder, pouring out of his speakers and open doors, filling the cold night air with warmth. He held out his hand. “Bet you didn’t know that your very favorite song was perfect for foxtrot.”

He grinned. He knew perfectly well that I did not know. Nor did I know what ‘foxtrot’ was. But the waves of music pushed me out of the car and he caught me, one hand firmly in the middle of my back, the other trailing down my arm to lift my hand. Despite my pessimism, my awkward shuffling and stumbling soon turned into smoothly spiraling sloooow quick-quick… sloooow quick-quick under his encouraging instruction.

“Yes, Brooke, you’ve got it!” he praised, and I looked up into his sweet smile. My eyes closed, and I relished the feeling of the familiar melody whirling us together as we moved in perfectly paralleled smoothly twirling steps. Sloooow quick-quick… sloooow quick-quick. My heartbeat thrummed a foxtrot. His gentle hand pressed to my back and guided my footsteps, and his thumb traced along the back of my hand joined with his as he held me. My heart was light and I felt my eyes fill with sparkle as the music held me even closer—closer than anyone could.

I don’t think I’ve ever been in love. It’s an abstract idea for me right now, a mysterious possibility on the horizon. But I’m in no rush. I’ll know it when I feel it. I think it will make me feel like music.
“If you would mourn me and bring me to God,  
Sing me a requiem, sing me to heaven.”

Our piano is in the front room, always in my path as I am coming and going, a magnet pulling me to sit down and waste those few minutes that I had planned to make me early to school and work. On a Thursday night, I got home late; work had been taxing, school even harder. I settled myself on the sturdy bench and pumped the pedal a few times, at a loss as to what my fingers were itching to play. Grieg’s concerto? Chopin’s waltz? I rifled through the precarious piles of worn sheet music resting all over the room, and my fingers grazed the rough cover of the hymnbook trailing across my name embossed in silvery script. I played through page after page of simple homophony, the automatic chord progressions coming out of my fingers just as they always had. But something felt different this time. Each hymn was infused with new meaning. On this plain Thursday night, tears filled my eyes and spilled over, washing me with warmth as the spirit sang along with my silently moving lips that mouthed the words,

‘Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee  
E’en though it be a cross that raiseth me.  
Still, all my song shall be,  
Nearer, my God, to thee;  
Nearer, my god to thee, nearer to thee!’

All my relationships—with my friends, parents, myself, boys—are infused with it, but my relationship with my Heavenly Father is almost solely through music. I sing my prayers and praises to him, and he returns with the lyrical words of the scriptures and the words and feelings of the inspired composers he uses as instruments in his hands.

“Sing me to heaven.”

Victor Hugo said, “Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.” The soundtrack I invent as my life passes plays along my head, and surrounds me. With a symphony of sound my love, my pain, my comfort, my grief, my passion are spoken in ways I could never
articulate. I am happily singing my way to heaven, because it is entwined in my brain and fills my soul. With music, I cannot be silent.

i ‘Sing Me to Heaven’ Text: Jane Griner, Dunstan House  
ii ‘This is Your Brain on Music: the Science of a Human Obsession’ Daniel J. Levitin, A Plume Book  
iii ‘Nearer, My God, To Thee’ Text: Sarah F. Adams, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Hymns