

Ex Tempore

by

Andrew Kass

Alais Kots steps out of the shadows of the wings, striding at larghetto 80 beats per minute into the light and applause to where the black mass of the piano awaits. She halts just before the upholstered bench, cheeks stretching her lips to resemble a smile, acknowledging the recognition with a stiff bow before sliding into place before the keyboard.

The keys stare at her like a rank of tombstones.

Those gathered in the wings shift perceptibly, there's a gesture of an arm rising across a body as for eyes to consult a watch, considering the end of what has not yet commenced.

Alais pulls her focus back to the keys, their latent increments of sound, sounds that she will draw from the hall, the wings, the ghostly shiftings in the seats below. She lays her hands on the cool flat keys.

With a bright F suspended second and ninth passing to an octave of the fourth and thirteenth, she recounts in larghetto the walk that brought her to this instrument, this moment, resolving at Cmajor7, the shaded fifth.

She feels the light of a door opening at the rear of the orchestra, late arrivals bearing a thought, a theme: Here. Now. Never before. Never again. Her fingers move, chording, chiming sonic textures to the hot sullen air of the hall.

Max had introduced her to Scriabin, huge plashy intervals of foreplay, exultation, *petit morte*. Alais extends a joyous arpeggio ending in a question: why of all the young men and

woman who had worshipped you, slaved to your guidance and whims, suffered your corrosive railings, did you choose me as your final acolyte, handservant, page turner, lover, victim?

Alais enters a minor mode, themes stealing in superseded by new themes, changing character, attempting to resolve only to be pulled back into the same chromatic undercurrent hinting at fresh themes, attempting, falling back.

Max flew in rare air with ministers and oligarchs, with Alais clinging to his coattails. He had set her debut on Christmas Day, a program of Chopin and Scriabin on Scriabin's birthday. He had not told her that he had arranged for projections on a screen behind her to present Scriabin's synesthesia of colors and sounds. Her focus had put Alais in a deep cave within the sounds that Scriabin had programmed and her hands produced until, when the piece ran out, she had sat for a long minute of applause unsure of what to do next.

Alais slows into a 3/4 quote from Scriabin's "Prelude in F major" set against a jazz vamp, throwing a couple of bars of "Cherokee" with her right hand while breaking the rhythm in the manner of the Scriabin piece.

Max's debut program had provided Alais with a critical piece of information about herself, that having digested volumes of music from a master, she found the pieces themselves limiting. Why play a Chopin Nocturne that hundreds, thousands of others had played? Why play a piece having a definite end? Someone with her training, knowledge and talent could play all day and night a music never heard before, invented from and for the moment, an intimate jazz. She was such a someone. Improvisation: as with Jarrett or Taylor, each expression personal, immediate, gone in the next note.

Alais rolls a barrelhouse boogie under a querulous Schoenberg right hand, marching and crashing and falling away to a lyrical walk. Max had detested the idea of shapeless music, what

he'd called it until the day in Vienna she had sat down at the piano and instead of the Rachmaninoff piece on the stand started with a theme borrowed from its opening statement and journeyed from there. She could feel Max wanting to yell, stamp his feet, even walk out, but the music, *her* music, held him as she worked her way back to Rachmaninoff's conclusion and hers, flavored with a little Gershwin.

She plays a Gershwin phrase now, then furthers it as Bach would, weaving a counterpoint. Max did not love her music, but he could not dispute that it was music, something new she had brought to him, her gift to his legacy.

A rustle in the wings. Restless? Leave. Alais does not know how long she has been playing. She never does. It is always, always a procession of moments expressed with pitch, tempo, harmony, dynamics, colors if you will, melody, moving, morphing, pushing on into the next uncharted moment, and the next.

Alais comes to a slow walking blues. Leave if you want to. I can play all night.

Knowing that when she stops, they will take her.

Thunder, rumbling from the left hand.

The time she ended a concert in Yekaterinburg and Max was not waiting. He was taken off, they said. Ill.

I must see him.

That is quite impossible. You have run late. You have a concert tomorrow in Nizhny Novgorod. You will just make the flight, there is no other.

Her right hand skitters over the rain-pebbled glass of the windshield, her left hand the metronomic *whup* of the wipers, the ascent away from Max, perhaps fled, perhaps ill, perhaps in hospital, perhaps... Her hands pause, the left shudders – DEAD, with a crashing chord.

The shapes at the curtain shift, but her hands run out from the wreckage, lifting, soaring past Nizhny Novgorod to Moscow, to here, now, Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, where Alais paints with sound. She resolves to a rippling series of arpeggios and lifts her head to the light, to the darkness beyond. There she finds wisps of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Tchaikovsky, hovering as they hovered about Max at the height of his powers. She calls them together, weaving them into a shape that is not just color but form. A man. A specific man Alais is willing into being before a gasping audience, for the stooped shape is palpable at the edge of the stage, just beyond the light and the reach of those in the wings.

Alais closes her eyes and draws speech from the shape, not words but fractured intervals within familiar melodies that will haunt the listeners long after the tyranny of silence returns. She pours herself diminished through her fingertips, echoing with the pedal at her feet, emptying into the aural image worked by her hands. The shadow darkens as she feels her own substance fade, uttering loss, dissolution, despair, until a single chord says, *Enough*.

Like the splash of a stone in a pond, the melody ripples out across the hall, carrying kinescopic views of Max receding, waving. Alais pulls her hands to her lap, the piano's voice fades to stillness, all is rapt, vacant, for a long moment.

And then a roar, a wave, standing, stamping applause, shouts.

Alais can barely lift her head to register the moment, the loss, the stirrings in the wings. She wills herself to rise again, bow, again. The boy comes from backstage bearing cut flowers. Alais looks out at the faces below, weeping. She drifts down the proscenium stair and up the aisle, distributing dead blossoms.

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