

The Four Notes

Alyssa Pelish

I.

I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY times I'd heard the melody without realizing it.

The last time, though, was early in November. I went to hear an evening of Brahms at Lincoln Center. I wasn't a person who listened to classical music. I knew Brahms had written a lullaby. But someone I half knew had two tickets she didn't want to waste. I ended up with both of them, and then, somehow, I just went alone. I don't especially mind going to performances alone. It makes me feel a little like a ghost, slipping silently in and out, observing but never speaking, the space so clearly unaltered by my brief presence.

The concert ended with something called *Six Pieces for Piano*. The pianist alone at that hulking vessel, the black grand that at times seemed to disappear into the darkness of the concert hall. The six pieces washed over me without making much of an indentation. I had no idea what to listen for, and no means of describing what I heard, save for an unsatisfying series of adjectives, as ineffectual as those used at a wine tasting. The mood, I could hear, did change from movement to movement. I watched as the pianist emoted, as most of them seem to do, using not just her face but her whole body, almost like a silent-movie actress, as if she were trying to pantomime those moods. Now stately, now wistful, now swaggering, now prim, now cool and dissonant.

The sixth movement, it maybe occurred to me, was different than what had come before. It was called an intermezzo, but nothing came after it. Was it starker, more repetitive? I had no way of telling. That, though, was the movement that ended the concert. There was no encore, for some reason, which momentarily confused the audience, who sat clapping, first enthusiastically, and then intermittently, as if, were they to just keep up the patter long enough, the performer would return. But she didn't, and gradually people began to accept that she wasn't going to and they rose, shrugging into their coats and then buttoning and zipping and tying the fasteners as they stood in front

of their seats, so that the concert hall emptied glacially, no row emptied until every person in it had fastened up their coat. I stood up silently and fumbled with the buttons on my own coat, saying nothing, hearing people around me but not hearing, in any particular way, what they were saying. Eventually, I slipped loose of the crowd and walked briskly in the now cold night to the express train, which all at once erupted into the station, as if from nowhere. I rode in silence, meeting no one's gaze but instead watching the reflections of people's faces in the darkened glass of the windows as the train rattled through tunnels.

The moon, as I emerged from the subway, was in that phase when it's just a suggestion of itself, a partial outline that adumbrates the rest of it, as long as you already know it's there. Somehow, I felt unsettled. I didn't have any words to describe how I felt, not precisely. My coat, I realized, was still unbuttoned. I wasn't walking straight. It was as if I'd missed a step and it had subtly altered my gait. And for the next few blocks, walking uphill to the point where the tower of the Cloisters is about as visible as the moon was then, I concentrated on taking evenly spaced steps, as if in this way I might regain my equilibrium.

I unlocked my door and undressed and washed my face and brushed my teeth in silence, like the ghost I'd been all night. And then I went to sleep.

II.

In the morning, or a morning not long after, like any other morning, I sat with a mug of tea and the curled crusts of toasted bread, scrolling through newspaper headlines. Light was just beginning to gray the ledge of sky I could see above the flat tops of the buildings across the street. In the apartment below, the trumpet began to sound. At its morning practice. Through the floorboards, its smudged brass notes drifted up to me. A child putting in one of her ten thousand hours. I pressed a pair of waxy earplugs into the portals of my ears and scrolled past more headlines, not bothering to click, the surface of the world floating by. The sound of the trumpeter was still audible. It wasn't scales she was playing, the trumpeter downstairs. Scales went distinctly up up up up, and then, just as distinctly, down down down down, as didactic as a child's recitation of her times tables. This was a tune, but it didn't get very far. It kept stopping and starting again. Halfway through my tea, I realized that there were only

four notes. *Da duh da dun . . .* and then it haltingly started over again. Each time, this solitary clarion . . . and then whatever came next would fall away. And again, the same four notes. They were bleak. *Da duh da dun. . .* For some while, I sat and listened to the trumpet blast out the same four notes, as if time were moving only in four-note increments, one increment no different from the next.

The four notes stopped. The sky had turned a lighter shade of gray. Time to leave for work.

It was like that for the next few mornings. The same four notes. I couldn't tell if the melody seemed familiar because I'd heard it somewhere before or because I'd now heard it so many times. If you'd given me a keyboard, I'm sure I could have picked it out with one finger. It was simple, but it didn't seem like a child's tune, like a lighthearted melody you'd skip rope to. It was too stark for that. Or was it menacing? I couldn't decide which. Maybe it was both. I would leave for work uneasy, without really knowing why.

One morning on my way out, I stepped into the lobby to find a woman and a little girl. The little girl was standing close to the woman and holding a musical instrument case. It was almost bigger than she was. I nodded at them, and then I realized that these were the people downstairs. Their name escaped me, but I knew them by sight. I don't think we'd ever spoken before. I bent down slightly, hesitantly, and asked the little girl if it was she who was playing trumpet in the morning. She looked up at me wide-eyed and clutched her instrument case to her chest. Her mother laughed and apologized and said she was always having to remind her to play with the mute in. "But what's the tune you've been playing?" I asked the little girl, who seemed torn between liking the attention and wanting to disappear behind her mother's skirts. She looked at me open-mouthed. I asked her mother if she knew. She laughed again. No, not at all. "She hears things—on the radio, on TV—and then she just picks them out on her horn." She glanced down at her daughter. "Half the time, we don't know what she's playing." Somehow, when she put it like that, it sounded dangerous. The girl could be picking up melodies, transmissions, from anywhere. The little girl was staring at me. I imagined her trying to determine the key signature of my voice.

III.

At the office, the stubby old man at the front desk greeted me as he always did, which was not at all. The tinny music from the old man's

ancient transistor radio, tuned always to the classical station, rose and fell over the workaday hum of the room. Heavy PCs sat like security boxes on every desk, open to reveal screens lined with code. A majority of the people who sat before these screens were wearing headphones. Near a whiteboard, multiple people were speaking, but no voice in particular stood out. We designed software with what's called privacy-enhancing filtering capabilities. Ad blockers, content control. There was an entire team devoted to manipulating cookies—those tiny caches of data that remember where a browser has been, what it's done.

We had inherited the old man with the office space. We had no real need for a front desk, or anyone to man it. We had no real need for someone to greet visitors (of which there were few) or to answer the phone (there was no landline). But the old man came with the office space, like a couch or a coffee pot that no one ever moved, and he demonstrated the importance of his position by the scrupulous attention he paid to the little notebook that was always open before him, almost like a ledger into which he was ceaselessly entering figures. Occasionally he would pause and gaze, as if from a distance, around the room, a habit of his that I found unnerving. Some people said he handled accounts, but that seemed unlikely.

Da . . . duh . . . da . . . dun . . .

I stared at the little man and his transistor radio. His brow was furrowed over the small notebook.

The same four notes, but heavier, lumbering, as if they were being sounded over a great distance. I stood without moving.

The tune wore on, adding notes that I hadn't heard before, but all, it seemed, in that same bleak range. Then those four notes again, the ones I seemed now to know by heart. My heart thudded in my chest.

Could he turn up the volume, I asked the little man. But he continued to furrow his brow at the notebook on his desk. I stood as close as I could to the little hutch he worked in, which contained him or closed him off from the rest of the office space, as if he were a small creature occupying a tollbooth that we all had to pass in order to reach our desks.

I strained to hear the low, lumbering procession of those notes, and when they returned again, this time brassier and higher, it was all I could do to keep from reaching for the tiny box of the transistor radio and pressing it to my ear. Low and lumbering again, almost subterranean, then high and resolute. I waited, but there was no more. Only a symphonic flourish that, it transpired, signaled the end of the piece.

The radio crackled with dead air. I had been holding my breath. Then the placid voice of station identification.

The little man cleared his throat in a deliberate way, just as the placid voice was noting the name of the composition that had just concluded. I backed away, slightly. The name was lost. Did he know, I asked the little man, addressing him for the first time I could remember, what the name of that piece was? But he only frowned, and went back to his accounting.

IV.

In my living room that night, the moon in its crescent phase just visible over the peaked tower of the Cloisters, it occurred to me that I could find the radio station that was always sounding from the little man's transistor, could figure out what the music was that I'd heard. Maybe, if it was a popular piece, they'd play it more than once in a day.

As was usual when I heard classical music, I recognized nothing except for sounds that I understood to be classical music. It was beyond me to explain why even this generic recognition was so. How was it that something was recognizable without your being able to pinpoint what about it was? How could you know something without knowing what about it you knew?

I brought the speaker into the kitchen with me and began to scrub and rinse the dishes that had accumulated over the course of the day. I liked to wake up to a kitchen like a blank slate, like a web browser wiped of its history: counters clear, sink empty and gleaming, cupboards concealing the dishes I'd used the day before.

And then it sounded, high and thin. The four notes. And then again.

It was the four notes, the same melody, but not the same composition I'd heard at the office. This was a different piece. A different piece but the same four notes. The same four notes, extended by two notes and then begun again. Then broken off and scattered, it seemed, into the rest of the piece, in a way I couldn't put my finger on. I could just feel it, the way you can still feel the presence of another person even after they've left the room. I listened, my hand still squeezing the sponge. *Da-duh-da-dun-duh-dah*. So those four notes belonged to a longer chain of notes, a longer melody. It rose up again, distinctly, high and clear. And then one last time, low and furtive, over as soon as you noticed it.

Debussy, I heard the placid voice say. *Nuages*.

The water in the sink was still running.

The name and the title meant nothing to me, except that I could look this piece up and listen to it again, which I did. Hunched over my laptop, I followed the notes that drifted across the screen of the video I'd selected, a view that gave up very little to my untutored gaze. I could teach myself to read the notes that corresponded to the melody. That was a code that was easy enough to crack. It took maybe twenty minutes. But even when I had the four notes, F-sharp-E-F-sharp-D, scrawled on the back of an envelope, it meant nothing to me.

There was no reason it should. When we begin to notice something—a word that, we suddenly realize, is everywhere, or a face that we'd otherwise never given any thought—it's most likely due to a change in routine or perspective. But because we keep noticing it, we think it must mean something, it must be significant. Eventually, though, we grow accustomed to whatever it is. Its seeming significance fades. This too would pass.

I swaddled myself in a blanket and stared at the streaming options on the TV. *Star Wars*, the one I'd known as a child, was one of the titles pulsing prominently on the screen. I wasn't given to nostalgia. What I watched or read or listened to was hardly ever based on that kind of gauzy view of the past. But at the time, I was drawn to the old movie. I couldn't say why. The soaring John Williams score filled my living room. I watched Leia hide the Death Star plans in R2-D2's memory, and Luke, as he was cleaning R2, accidentally trigger part of Leia's pleading message. Obi-Wan presented Luke with his father's lightsaber, a weapon he must have carried with him for years. Luke found his aunt and uncle's homestead burned to the ground, everyone gone, everything gone, and the John Williams score swelled again, mournfully. And then the four notes. Stark and bleak and . . . then again. And the screen slid away from Luke in front of the smoldering homestead.

The sound blaring from the speakers was, I realized, deafening. I couldn't believe the neighbors weren't pounding on the wall. The buttons I pressed on the remote did nothing to lower the volume. It was as if the batteries were dead or the distance between the couch and the TV were too far.

I started up frantically toward the source of the sound and tripped over the folds of my blanket. On my knees, I fumbled in the dark for the OFF button, palpating the sides of the monitor, pressing every button I could. The voices boomed, unbearably. Finally I reached for the cord and ripped it from the outlet.

On the floor, in the dark, I waited for a while.

I tried to breathe evenly.

The recurrence of the melody, at this point, seemed beyond probability. But that's just the nature of coincidences. They seem meaningful but they're not. The law of truly large numbers states that, given a large enough number of opportunities, any outrageous thing is likely to happen. Any outrageous thing. My ears were confronted with a countless number of sounds just in the course of a single day. I'd watched *Star Wars* over and over as a child. It was only now that I'd noticed those four notes—because a five-year-old trumpeter had been playing them repeatedly, right beneath my floorboards. Maybe *she'd* been watching *Star Wars*. What I was experiencing was something more like confirmation bias. The melody was in my head, and so I heard the melody.

It shouldn't have come as any surprise then that after plugging the TV back in, a little defiantly, I landed on an episode of a show I'd never watched before, and, as the machinations of its plot drew the episode to its end—the four notes sounded. High and clear and . . . they sounded four times. A judge cloaked in black stepped down from a train led by a gleaming locomotive.

I didn't sleep well. I remembered none of my dreams in the morning, as if I'd merely been lying awake with my eyes closed. The sky lightening the windows, though, made me feel calmer. In the shower, I let the water rinse over me for a long while. In the silence of the kitchen, my tea steeped, my bread toasted.

The screen of my phone, I noticed, as I waited, as I was bobbing the tea bag in and out of the water, still displayed the classical music station. I hadn't touched it since the night before. I looked at it, almost experimentally. To press the glowing blue button that would bring the live stream into my home seemed, now, like accepting a dare. I went back to my tea. But the dare consisted of something like stepping on a sidewalk crack or walking under a ladder. That is, its risk inhered in my believing there was a risk.

I went back to the station I'd called up on the screen. I pressed play.

After a moment, I sat down with my tea and my toast. I began to scroll through the newspaper headlines, one after another. A war, a peace negotiation, an earthquake, a protest march, a bombing, a trove of ancient artifacts discovered at the bottom of the Black Sea, a corporate merger. I ate without interruption.

It was as I was carrying my dishes to the sink that I heard the notes.

My plate and mug and butter knife clattered into the stainless-steel

Alyssa Pelish

basin. I leaned with my elbows on the counter and stared, without really seeing it, into the sink.

I listened.

Unlike the other two compositions, the whole shape of this composition seemed to emerge from the melody itself. First, the four notes were ventured, high and eerie and . . . lonely. I could almost see two fingers pressing two keys, and then one more key, the fingers separate from the rest of the hand, from the rest of the keyboard.

The flesh tones of my own face, direly misshapen, appeared on the side of the butter knife that lay in the sink.

The notes repeated, and then they were overwhelmed by a deluge of other notes, like a single long strum of a harp. But the melody resurfaced soon after, this time at a lower pitch. It felt more urgent. Again it was flushed away by the harp-like deluge. It returned, somehow altered, maybe more dissonant, yet still recognizable. Over and over, the four notes returned, were washed away, and resurfaced.

I stood in front of the sink and listened until the notes died away for good.

That was Number 6, Intermezzo in E-flat Minor, from Six Pieces for Piano, Opus 118, the placid voice announced. By Johannes Brahms.

In a moment, I was on my knees, sifting through the bin beneath the sink.

Number 6, Intermezzo in E-flat Minor, read the program notes from the evening of Brahms, is a work based on the obsessive repetitions, variations, and reharmonizations of a single melodic idea, a single motive. I remained on the kitchen floor. That germinal motive, presented all by itself at the very start of the piece, is unmistakably the “Dies irae,” a Gregorian chant of the requiem mass.

Above me, a drip drip drip sounded in the basin of the sink.

V.

The *Dies irae* first appeared in the thirteenth century. (I downloaded a copy of the 733-page *Guide to Requiem Music* that day.) It, the *Dies irae*, crept into the requiem masses of Western Europe between the tractus, which begs the Lord God for absolution, and the Gospel reading of the death of Lazarus. *Dies irae, dies illa*. Day of wrath, that day. It's a chant about Judgment Day, the day when our souls will be laid bare and appraised for all time.

This information made me uneasy, but I couldn't say why. Even if

I were a believer, I had no reason to think my soul was in danger.

The chant, I learned, runs on for nearly nineteen verses, envisioning a quaking world dissolved into ash, trumpets sounding. The gist of these verses can be traced back centuries earlier, to a Jewish prayer that itself foretells a day of judgment, but their thirteenth-century Christian form—end-rhymed tercets in the heavy footsteps of trochaic meter (*stressed*, unstressed)—is traditionally attributed to an Italian friar of the Franciscan order. The author of the melody, though, remains unknown.

Circumspectly, I asked a classical musical scholar about the *Dies irae*—an acquaintance of someone I used to know. The city is littered with such acquaintances, people you half know and never see who can be summoned, briefly, with an @. He knew of the *Dies irae*, of course. His memory of the melody didn't falter. On the screen of my phone, I watched him sing it in a low tenor, his face suddenly turned upward. *Dies irae, dies illa*. Half step down, half step back up, he explained, three minor steps down. He closed his eyes, trying to remember the rest. Then he just hummed the first four notes alone.

It sometimes seems to me, now, that that four-note melody is what remains of the entire, elaborate body of the chant, like the spire of a sunken cathedral. Who, now, can remember the design or details of the larger structure?

The music scholar offered to play the whole of it for me in person, on a grand piano, but I declined. I was busy, I said.

VI.

Unsleeping at three in the morning, I skimmed over screen after screen of streaming options and hesitated at another movie from childhood. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen it. Maybe in that old revival house on Oak Street, gone now. Though I haven't been back that way in years. A couple of us, in the back seat of the truck on the way there. A closeness of elbows and shoulders and breath. How many years had it been?

In a second the movie began, the whole squadron of WWII-era fighter jets suddenly resurfaced in the dusty Sonoran Desert. On the couch, I clutched a throw pillow to my chest and watched the signs and wonders play out. The bright lights in the sky, the people hectored in their homes and cars by inexplicable electrical activity, more bright lights, a long-lost ship surfacing in another desert, thousands of Indian

Alyssa Pelish

villagers chanting the five tones they heard from the sky, the official denials.

And, as a crowd gathered on a cliff's edge to await what they sensed was coming, the faces of a bemused elderly couple were lit up by the approaching lights—and the four notes sounded, high and almost sweet.

As the halo of unknown flying objects drew closer to the assembled townspeople, the four notes were plucked out in quick, suspenseful succession.

And then, as the camera zoomed in on believer Richard Dreyfuss's open-mouthed face, the notes sounded drastically, claustrophobically.

After a moment, I reached for the remote and silenced the screen.

I lay there with my eyes closed and tried not to replay the melody in my head. Maybe I drifted off for a while.

The movie, I recall now, has its own repeating melody: the five tones that the flying ships emit, that the earthlings themselves begin to repeat, uncertain of the meaning, almost like a game of Marco Polo. A little boy taps out the rising, falling, rising melody on his toy xylophone. His frantic mother hears it when she picks up the phone. The secret government task force sounds it back into the sky on a computerized keyboard. No one knows what it means, just that to repeat it is to acknowledge the communication.

Strangely, when the spacecraft does touch down, what it first releases from its hidden recesses is the past. Not something futuristic, not something alien, but the past. Wave after wave of people who have been lost to time stagger forward.

When I opened my eyes, I could feel the flat shape of an electronic device in my hand. Only when I tried to tap out a number did I realize it wasn't my phone but the remote control.

It wasn't a number I'd called in ages.

VII.

When the *Dies irae* melody enters the fifth movement of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, it is wholly unmistakable. (There it is.) It lumbers, it plods, it heaves each note forth. Each individual note, in turn, is weighted down for a count of three. *Di . . . es . . . ir . . . ae*. Tubas and bassoons. *Di . . . es . . . il . . . la*. The effect is sort of Looney Tunes does the requiem mass. (There it is, there.)

At the Paris Conservatoire, on an evening late in the year 1830, the debut of the *Symphonie fantastique* marked the first emergence of

the *Dies irae* melody outside of a funeral mass. I can only imagine what it was like to suddenly hear a melody from the requiem mass fill the air of a night at the symphony. (Down, up, further down.) It had never appeared like that before. Shock, or maybe something like revulsion, is the note that runs through what critical response remains. (The NYPL's digital collection is surprisingly vast.) "The pen falls from my hands!" wrote the esteemed François-Joseph Fétis, in his *Revue musicale*. Mendelssohn despised the whole thing. "Utterly loathsome," he wrote in a letter to his mother. *Le Figaro* called it "the most monstrous *bizarrerie* you could imagine." It must have seemed truly uncanny, this old, familiar tune in a place where you least expected it. (In *The Lion King*, for instance. *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Iron Man 3*. In *Home Alone*, for God's sake.)

"That gay refrain that everybody knows," Berlioz called it, decades later, as if it were the chorus of a drinking song. By then the melody was surfacing in other secular compositions. (Again. There it is again.) It would reappear more and more often. Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky. At first as an apparent evocation of death or doom. *Dance of the Dead*, *Danse macabre*. (With the weather so cold, there's no real reason to leave the apartment.) But then more abstractly, turning up where it wasn't necessarily expected, compositions whose titles didn't announce their morbidity. (My playlist keeps growing.) Chausson, Tchaikovsky—where its first two lines are blatted out inexplicably in the fourth variation of his Suite no. 3, and then never appear again ("a strident interruption," one critic wrote). The last of Brahms's Six Pieces for Piano, Mahler's second symphony in C Minor, the first of Debussy's Three Nocturnes. Six different pieces by Rachmaninoff. (I forget how long I spent with just the Rachmaninoff.) At one point, he confessed that he didn't know where the melody came from. He just knew the four notes, which he used over and over.

VIII.

It's not unusual to wear a pair of noise-canceling headphones at work. It's impossible to focus if you know that something might interrupt you, at any moment. A white noise loop was streaming into my ears when I opened the actions file. Bright characters on a black screen, all in their rows. I was updating certain blocking actions, as is necessary from time to time. (Down, up, further down.) The arms race between adware and ad blockers is endless. (Down, up, further down.) I found it soothing work, picking apart each new attempt to

force an advertiser's bloated pop-ups and banner ads over the series of walls and moats we'd already set up, then figuring out how to deflect it. (Down, up, further down.) At the time, though, browsers using our blockers were taking longer than usual to load pages. Fix it ASAP was the gist of the intra-office directive aimed at me. Someone's code was slowing down the entire program. It was up to me, then, to sift through the existing code for any bugs, any inefficiencies. (Down, up, further down.)

In the armory of the actions file, there were the familiar lines of our defense, blocking and filtering. I opened `blockpopups.c` first, prepared to tighten and polish our armor against what's probably the most detested form of adware, those uninvited guests that bounce onto your screen, hijacking your field of vision, even your audio system.

```
{+block{all-popups{fefd?}}
```

I read.

And elsewhere,

```
$match =~ m/.*\/(fefd)?pop(-)?up(s)?/;
```

At the desks nearest to me, no one looked up from their screens. The silver second hand of the clock on the wall continued to tick out its regular ambit.

On my screen, further down, I read:

```
/^!\s*/ad(vert)?[f|e|f|d]/\s*/i
```

An office door opened and closed soundlessly. The people who stood in front of it made their awkward goodbyes, nodding emphatically, widening their eyes, as if in a dumb show. The developer at the standing desk in front of mine lolled his neck from side to side, then back and forth, then side to side, as he tended to do roughly every fifteen minutes, his bald head like a heavy, shiny weight.

The string *fefd* made no sense. It was everywhere, buried like a nut, in every blocking action: `/.*/cookie(s)?(fefd)?/` and `/.*/banner(s)?(fefd)?/`, and on and on. But it was doing nothing. The regular targets of the seek-and-block mission, the pop-ups and banners and cookies, were all still being identified and deflected. It was just that this interloper of a sequence, *fefd*, was slowing down that process. It was everywhere.

I scrolled more quickly. The lines of code blurred into one another. `fefdfefdfefd` I scrolled up again, stopped at the sharp bars of a hash mark that signals a comment, a narrow window of explanation:

```
# this blocks 0 or 1 instances of fefd pop-ups
```

And another:

```
# this blocks instances of either f or e or f or d
```

And another:

```
# this blocks 0 or 1 instances of fefd cookies
```

The developer at the standing desk was still now. Head bent toward his screen, the small knobs of his spine jutted delicately above the collar of his moisture-wicking shirt.

I felt the moistness of my palms.

It was clear the problem was that, in order to block *fefd* you needed to refer to *fefd*. You had to keep referring to what you wanted to block. The white noise rushed softly in my ears. I leaned forward.

But was there a way to block *fefd* without referring to *fefd*? Is there ever?

I scrolled further down, to the last line of code, which was more difficult to decipher, and then the final comment, which was barely that:

```
# x = f...e...f...d fe.f.d. f.ef.d f..e..f..d..f..e..f..d..
# f..e..f..d..f..e..d..ff f...e...f...d... f..e..f..d..f..e..d..
# f...e f...d f...e f...d fefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfe
# f e f d f e f d f e f e f.. f e f d f e f d f e f e f..
# f.efd fefdfe f d. f.efd fefdfe f d. f.efd fefdfe f d.
# f efd fe fd fef d f e f d f efd f efdfe fdfe fdfe fdfe fdfe
# dfefdfefefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfefdfef
```

Over and over, and over.

The rush of white noise roared softly in my ears. The developer at the standing desk mutely scratched his shiny head, tugged, mutely, at his earlobe. Around the room, people labored mutely over their keyboards, spoke mutely in front of the microwave and mini fridge. The little old man at his guard post nodded to himself; his transistor played mutely. I looked at my hands, flexed my hands, watched the tops of my fingers disappear behind my knuckles, then reappear.

\$ git log, I finally typed, to see who'd made the most recent modifications to the file. The black terminal filled with four-line chunks of information—the checksum, the author, the date and time, the action.

There, at the top, was my name.

IX.

It's hard to say if the *Dies irae* motive is unsettling because of its composition or because it became associated with unsettling things.

Alyssa Pelish

It is, as any plainchant sequence was, a simple melody. You could play it on the piano with just two fingers. Two fingers. I did this once, recently, in a Steinway showroom in Hell's Kitchen. The salesperson looked at me with such suspicion that I had to leave immediately. The melody as it was chanted in the thirteenth century was preserved on the now-archaic four-line staff of what's called neumatic notation, the smudge of a C hooked around the highest line to mark the spot of what we'd call middle C, tiny jots of ink blotching the lines and spaces.

Again. There it is again.

There are no sleek stems or beams or flags ornamenting the notes, no elaborately involuted treble clef winding itself around the staff. But the jots of ink form a pattern, and this pattern makes a melody. *Fa mi fa re*. Or, as it's read today, F E F D.

The door buzzer like the sound of an old phone.

The first three notes move by half steps, minor seconds. Tense and somber. On the piano keyboard, it's just two white keys immediately next to each other. F E F. You play it with two fingers, stuttering back and forth. But the fourth note doesn't return to E. Instead it falls farther back on the scale. It descends to D. D is the tonic of the composition, the pitch of repose. The melody's been fiddling back and forth between E and F, the notes just above that pitch, but that fourth note falls as if back into the grave, back to the pitch of repose.

Again.

Every phrase, every sentence of the fifty-five-measure composition ends on D. The final note of the chant, the very last note sounded, is D.

There it is again.

This means it's in Dorian, one of the eight medieval church modes. Guido d'Arezzo, an eleventh-century Benedictine monk and early theorist of music, characterized it, in his *Micrologus*, as *gravis*—"serious." Dorian is a minor mode, and minor modes sound somber to Western ears. It's hard to say why. But they do.

Six hundred years later, when the melody surfaces in Berlioz's symphony, the bassoons and ophicleides (those snakelike ancestors of the tuba) play those notes more slowly than they've ever been heard—each one sounds for a count of three.

Again. With the sound up.

Berlioz has changed the key signature and the notes themselves: now in C minor, the notes lumber from E-flat down to D to E-flat again, and then down to C. The notes change as they're blatted out by the cornets and trombones and yet again when the flutes, piccolos,

and oboes come mincing in. The motive moves around the scale like a restless spirit, but it's always a pattern of descent, of two half steps followed by an interval of three steps, and the phrase always ends on its pitch of repose.

Again.

In the very last years of the nineteenth century, as the first notes of Debussy's *Clouds* sound, the *Dies irae* motive seems to sidle from the clarinets and bassoons, winding into a nocturne whose tonality is continually shifting, so that it's all but impossible to pinpoint in what key or mode those four notes, their intervals of a second, a second, and a third, occur.

There.

And there, and there.

The material of the *Dies irae* has subtly shifted. The motive is open to interpretation.

Again.

But it's still, unmistakably, the *Dies irae*.

Early in the twentieth century, the D-major violas slide slowly into the *Dies irae* motive as the second movement of Rachmaninoff's *Bells* begins.

There it is, the E-flat vibrating for a count of two and a half before a D briefly punctuates it and the E-flat vibrates again, and is again punctuated, this time by a diminished C, a C *not* leaning toward its pitch of repose but, rather, just floating.

Again.

All of the intervals are minored, darkened. By the sixth bar of the movement, the sweeter violins join the dark viola, but they both now pick out the notes frantically, in a rush of thirty-second notes.

There it is.

Another time.

In this movement, innocuously titled "The Mellow Wedding Bells," the notes of the *Dies irae* seem almost to drift in, imprecisely, unexpectedly, as if a window has been left open.

There.

The *Dies irae* motive, it occurs to me now, is more about the relation of its notes to one another than it is about the notes themselves.

There.

The notes are oddly fungible. This is why, incidentally, it's hard to create a blocking device for the motive. It appears in different guises—different keys, durations, tempos, timbres, even modes—but the melody itself persists.

Alyssa Pelish

I'm not fearful. I don't imagine anyone is waiting for me in the shadows. I no longer think anyone is waiting for me.

X.

The moon that night, as I emerged from the subway, floated high and solitary in the dark blue of the city sky. After a while, as I walked, the peaked tower of the Cloisters rose over the trees. When I reached my apartment, I undressed and washed my face and brushed my teeth in silence, and then I put my earplugs in and tried to sleep.

XI.

Six Pieces for Piano was the next-to-last composition Brahms published in his lifetime. In those later years, he began to withdraw from the public world of the orchestra, from grand symphonies, and he returned to writing pieces for a solo pianist. During the leave of absence I've taken, I have listened to them all. I find that I prefer the solo compositions to the swell of orchestral harmonizing. There is something contained about them, something self-modulating, which I appreciate.

Once more.

In the *Six Pieces*, from the first piece to the last, there is a descent, a falling back down the scale, step by step, piece by piece—so that the first piece, another of Brahms's so-called intermezzos, is in the key of A minor, while the very last is the intermezzo in E-flat minor. (There was a vogue among the Romantics, I have read, for naming a piece an *intermezzo* despite its connecting nothing at all—save for the empty air—as if to recall the ruins and fragments that fired their imaginations.) In addition to this continual descent, there also seems to be a stripping away, or at least a final gesture toward that: all five of the preceding pieces begin with chords, fingers striking keys in unison—until the pianist arrives at the sixth piece. The sixth piece begins with only one finger playing at a time, stark and lonely, for over two measures.

Another time, another time.

This hanging intermezzo in E-flat is the only time the notes of the *Dies irae* appear in Brahms's work. And again. He wrote a requiem in his thirties, and, in his last year of life, a song cycle about death, but the *Dies irae* is not a part of those. It's not something that creeps into those works at any point. When he wrote his requiem, Brahms

had already developed his own minor theme that would continue to appear, as an evocation of death, in his other explicitly funereal works. It's hard to feel, then, that this final solo of the six piano solos is about death. Or rather, not about death per se.

There.

It seems more like it's about a struggle. Because, while the piece itself grows out of the first notes of the *Dies irae*, repeating and mutating, it is also, partway through, countered by a shiny, plucky motive that you can almost visualize marching heroically against the bleak tones of the *Dies irae*. It is everything the first theme is not: clear in tonality instead of hazy, vigorously staccato instead of blurred and lingering, and it moves continually forward, whereas the first theme is static, repetitive. Again. The plucky theme is interrupted, though, or maybe dragged down, by the desolate tones, until, eventually, it's wholly overtaken

There

by the variations on the *Dies irae* that otherwise constitute the piece, and the valiant attempt to march against it is forgotten.

Or maybe "struggle" isn't the right word for what happens in this finale of an intermezzo. It's true that the vibrant second theme tries to rise above the stark and lonely *Dies irae* motive, but it's hard to feel that it ever had a chance. It's barely begun before the *Dies irae* interrupts it, then interrupts it again, and finally overwhelms it.

Back again.

Is it instructive to remember that both of these themes are played by one pianist, were played by Brahms, to himself, in the solitude of his rooms in Bad Ischl?

In biographies of Brahms—which I've now read a lot of—much is made of the moment he turned away from Clara Schumann. What remains of letters and diaries suggests how close they had become over the three years since young Johannes first played his piano compositions for the Schumanns, and particularly over the two years that he lived in the Schumanns' home so as to help Clara with her eight children, once her husband had consigned himself to an asylum. Johannes stayed in the house in Düsseldorf, clowning with the children, composing on the family's grand piano, burrowing into the books in their library, and writing fervent letters to Clara when she was away giving concerts. "I can do nothing but think of you," goes a typical letter from Johannes to Clara. And later: "I can no longer exist without you." In their letters to each other, the two began using *du*, that intimate form of *you* that was then so rarely tendered between

two adults. "How hard I found it to say goodbye to Johannes," Clara wrote in her diary. "I cling to this friend with all my heart, and I always feel it terribly when I have to part from him."

And so, when her husband died—even before her husband died—there hung between them the possibility that Johannes and Clara would marry—a prospect alluded to in at least one of his letters as "the un-answered question." But a few months later, Brahms left the home in Düsseldorf and retreated to his childhood bedroom in Hamburg. "I felt as if I were returning from a funeral," Clara wrote of walking home alone from the train station that day.

"His ruggedness," Clara's youngest daughter would write much later of the prickly man she'd known, "was a perpetual state of defense against suspected attacks of others on his independence and the privacy of his existence." In a letter he wrote close to the age of thirty, Brahms himself reflected, "I have always been cut out for the monastery."

Brahms eventually destroyed all the letters Clara had sent to him. There it is.

Thirty-seven years after he left her home, Brahms dedicated the *Six Pieces for Piano* to Clara. She had been a virtuoso concert pianist, but at the age of seventy-three, she could play for only a few minutes at a time.

This is not to say that the E-flat intermezzo is specifically about Clara, any more than it's specifically about death. Just as Brahms already had a death theme, he already had a Clara theme, five notes that he smuggled into his compositions when he was a much younger man. His *Dies irae* is not that.

I only mean to say that the intermezzo sounds like it's about a struggle.

Here it is.

There is a crucial moment in the piece, in the vibrant second theme, where it seems that this theme might triumph. Brahms even sets us a chord that, by every convention, anticipates the arrival of a full, triumphant major chord. But a different chord arrives, a minor one—it's been diminished by a single half step.

Here.

And with that, the same arpeggio from the beginning washes us back to the key of the *Dies irae* theme, where we stay until the end.

Brahms himself never played the *Six Pieces* outside his own rooms. He had by then given up all concert giving. A rare visitor to

his rooms on the outskirts of Bad Ischl recalled watching the now elderly man play the six pieces.

Once more through.

“His technique was equal to any difficulty encountered in his own works,” the future biographer observed. “He would often play as if to himself.”