ARTICLE

An Ear for Hope

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When I was a kid, my parents only allowed classical music to be played in our home before two o'clock in the afternoon. I hated it. My rushing testosterone and proclivity for palm-muted distortion and anarchic choruses made it difficult to appreciate spanning symphonies and complex concertos. It wasn't until after years of violin lessons and when I entered my teens that I was willing to slow down *just* enough to listen to some of what was really going on in Holst's *Jupiter* or Dvořák's *New World*. I still remember the moment I first heard Bruch's *Concerto No. 1*. It overwhelmed me in the most wonderful way. All the angst and desire for nonconformity that the Dead Kennedys or Minor Threat had crudely assuaged was transcended through a single aggressive violin and accompanying orchestra. I felt the same way when I first came across the Icelandic pianist phenom, Vikingur Ólafsson and his recent *Debussy Rameau* (2020) recordings. Ólafsson's *Reflections* unites classical with contemporary through thrilling improvisation, eclectic collaborations, and electronic interpretations dispersed within various modern compositional "reflections." He reshapes old songs into new and provides an intellectually radical respite for those who are willing to just listen.

During a time of intense private anxieties and widespread social crises, classical music like Ólafsson's conveyed a universal expression of hope that I often relied upon as it connected me to the past through song, much like the classic novels I have come to revere do. *Reflections'* reworkings and collaborations which was released in 2020 reminded me during the pandemic that we are not just meant to survive, but that we can flourish even under the most turbulent of conditions; that despite our circumstances, humanity will endure and will constantly be enriched. By bringing the past into the present, *Reflections* demanded attention to detail in a way that didn't allow me to escape the tremors of today as much as find a renewed vision for tomorrow. Evenings spent away from Netflix and with Ólafsson's *Reflections* have inspired me to reflect on the past while looking *forward* to tomorrow. It's also taught me that God speaks to me through a variety of mediums and in many intonations. To echo a line from one of my favorite novels by Sigrid Nunez, "I [have] discovered the miraculous possibility that art holds out to us: to be a part of the world and to be removed from the world at the same time." The further I've advanced in my collegiate career, the more I am astounded by the power of art, music, and literature to fill me with hope in humanity and optimism for the future. I've also learned that some voices are more important for me to listen to than others.

Early into my university experience, I took a special interest in Indigenous American history and literature for a variety of reasons. The intense emotions evoked by reading and coming to terms with the history and experiences of Indigenous denigration, displacement, and oft attempted extermination has led me to tears more times than I care to admit. That crushing

sorrow often gave birth to rage and anger at God, at America and its institutions, and at those who perpetuated and continue to enact violence against the vulnerable. It *should* be challenging to read the narratives of Jamestown, Wounded Knee, or about the displacement of Indigenous children by way of federal boarding schools, which continue to be uncovered as sites of horror and mass destruction, and not feel deep, even righteous anger.

The reality is that often the story stops there, however. We listen, but anger is loud. Collective moral outrage—however rooted in genuine concern it may be—too often leads scholars and even the best-intentioned learners to not listen to the whole story. As a result, many now understand and remember Indigenous communities and their experiences predominantly as victims of colonial oppression and federal abuse. While scholars continue to re-narrate colonial and post-colonial relations through diverse Indigenous perspectives, the culminating focus has largely centered on the many forms of physical and cultural violence that Indigenous people have endured since first contact. Unquestionably, it remains critical to identify the historical and ongoing causes of physical and psychological concerns among Indigenous nations as they directly relate to the generational trauma and deracinating practices that Indigenous peoples have sustained. However, it would be dishonest to end the story of Native America by concluding that trauma and heartache are all that Indigenous peoples have experienced or taken with them into modernity. Their poetry, literature, and artistic expressions are evidence enough of their creative survivance and remarkable resilience.

The quietly profound advice offered by a gentle professor-turned mentor-turned dearest friend to “just listen” has been especially instrumental in my journey of becoming a scholar of faith. It has encouraged me to listen more intently to the voices of survivors and creators and to hear what is beyond the anger that so often accompanies my politics, my church attendance, and my research. Learning to listen with hope rather than anger has since functioned as my underlying methodological approach to my literary studies and has helped me have faith in humanities’ resilience and elegance. Developing faith that I will be able find hope if only I listen more intently always leads me to locate God’s loving presence in the world and has helped me to do as the apostle Paul invites in 2 Corinthians, to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is *unseen*. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is *eternal*" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

I’ve also come to learn that fear is often as overwhelming loud as anger. When everywhere else was forced to shut down due to pandemic-induced lockdowns, bookstores—along with pharmacies, and bakeries (thank heavens)—were deemed essential businesses in Germany. For over a year, queues of masked readers lined the narrow streets of Heidelberg waiting for their turn to wander through freshly stocked shelves. How wonderful that when reduced to the bare essentials, Germans felt that literature was as fundamental to life as bread and medicine. Having grown up in a small town in Oregon with a single bookstore and an underfunded library, surviving the pandemic in the land of Goethe and Rilke, where literature is considered indispensable was a literary dream come true.

Leaving Germany felt like I was leaving a literary (and literal) Eden—complete with wisteria-limned bookstores, quaint cafes, pathless woods, and a fourteenth-century library. They even have affordable healthcare. As I dauntingly readied myself to return to the States, which feel less United every day, I anxiously prepared applications to PhD programs to be able to

continue fully immersing myself in reading, research, and teaching literature to the next generation. While I am confident that an appreciation for reading, writing, and critical, contemplative thinking prompts ingenuity and fosters empathy, the further I've advanced as a grad student, the more disillusioned I've become by the constraints of the academic world, the Church, and my nation's institutions. I'm not certain they're as socially productive as I had once been so persuaded. And I'm not entirely convinced they're as culturally constructive as I once had dreamed. I am confident, however, that as I strive to listen to the hope that is often just out of earshot, just beyond my angers and current fears of failure and finding purpose in academia, that I will be able to discover what God now wants me to hear in Cambridge. And an ear full of hope is enough for now.