

# Once More, Legato, Ray Bradbury

Once More, Legato

Fentriss sat up in his chair in the garden in the middle of a fine autumn and listened. The drink in his hand remained unsipped, his friend Black unspoken to, the fine house unnoticed, the very weather itself neglected, for there was a veritable fountain of sound in the air above them.

“My God,” he said. “Do you hear?”

“What, the birds?” asked his friend Black, doing just the opposite, sipping his drink, noticing the weather, admiring the rich house, and neglecting the birds entirely until this moment.

“Great God in heaven, listen to them!” cried Fentriss.

Black listened. “Rather nice.”

“Clean out your ears!”

Black made a halfhearted gesture, symbolizing the cleaning out of ears.

“Well?”

“Damn it, don’t be funny. I mean really listen! They’re singing a tune!”

“Birds usually do.”

“No, they don’t; birds paste together bits and pieces maybe, five or six notes, eight at the most. Mockingbirds have repertoires that change, but not entire melodies. These birds are different. Now shut up and give over!”

Both men sat, enchanted. Black’s expression melted.

“I’ll be damned,” he said at last. “They do go on.” He leaned forward and listened intently.

“Yes . . .” murmured Fentriss, eyes shut, nodding to the rhythms that sprang like fresh rain from the tree just above their heads. “. . . ohmigod . . . indeed.”

Black rose as if to move under the tree and peer up. Fentriss protested with a fierce whisper:

“Don’t spoil it. Sit. Be very still. Where’s my pencil? Ah . . .”

Half peering around, he found a pencil and notepad, shut his eyes, and began to scribble blindly.

The birds sang.

“You’re not actually writing down their song?” said Black.

“What does it look like? Quiet.”

And with eyes now open, now shut, Fentriss drew scales and jammed in the notes.

“I didn’t know you read music,” said Black, astonished.

“I played the violin until my father broke it. Please! There. There. Yes!

“Slower,” he whispered. “Wait for me.”

As if hearing, the birds adjusted their lilt, moving toward piano instead of bravado.

A breeze stirred the leaves, like an invisible conductor, and the singing died.

Fentriss, perspiration beading his forehead, stopped scribbling and fell back.

“I’ll be damned.” Black gulped his drink. “What was that all about?”

“Writing a song.” Fentriss stared at the scales he had dashed on paper.

“Or a tone poem.”

“Let me see that!”

“Wait.” The tree shook itself gently, but produced no further notes. “I want to be sure they’re done.”  
Silence.

Black seized the pages and let his eyes drift over the scales. “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,” he said, aghast. “It works.” He glanced up at the thick green of the tree, where no throat warbled, no wing stirred. “What kind of birds are those?”

“The birds of forever, the small beasts of an Immaculate Musical Conception. Something,” said Fentriss, “has made them with child and its name is song—”

“Hogwash!”

“Is it?! Something in the air, in the seeds they ate at dawn, some whim of climate and weather, God! But now they’re mine, it’s mine. A fine tune.”

“It is,” said Black. “But can’t be!”

“Never question the miraculous when it happens. Good grief, maybe those damned wonderful creatures have been throwing up incredible songs for months, years, but no one listened. Today, for the first time, someone did. Me! Now, what to do with the gift?”

“You don’t seriously mean—?”

“I’ve been out of work for a year. I quit my computers, retired early, I’m only forty-nine, and have been threatening to knit macramé to give friends to spoil their walls, day after day. Which shall it be, friend, macramé or Mozart?”

“Are you Mozart?”

“Just his bastard son.”

“Nonsense,” cried Black, pointing his face like a blunderbuss at the trees as if he might blast the choir. “That tree, those birds, are a Rorschach test. Your subconscious is picking and choosing notes from pure chaos.

There's no discernible tune, no special rhythm. You had me fooled, but I see and hear it now: you've had a repressed desire since childhood to compose. And you've let a clutch of idiot birds grab you by the ears. Put down that pen!"

"Nonsense right back at you." Fentriss laughed. "You're jealous that after twelve layabout years, thunderstruck with boredom, one of us has found an occupation. I shall follow it. Listen and write, write and listen. Sit down, you're obstructing the acoustics!"

"I'll sit," Black exclaimed, "but—" He clapped his hands over his ears.

"Fair enough," said Fentriss. "Escape fantastic reality while I change a few notes and finish out this unexpected birth."

Glancing up at the tree, he whispered:

"Wait for me."

The tree rustled its leaves and fell quiet.

"Crazy," muttered Black.

One, two, three hours later, entering the library quietly and then loudly, Black cried out:

"What are you doing?"

Bent over his desk, his hand moving furiously, Fentriss said:

"Finishing a symphony!"

"The same one you began in the garden?"

"No, the birds began, the birds!"

"The birds, then." Black edged closer to study the mad inscriptions.

"How do you know what to do with that stuff?"

"They did most. I've added variations!"

"An arrogance the ornithologists will resent and attack. Have you composed before?"

“Not”—Fentriss let his fingers roam, loop, and scratch—“until today!”  
“You realize, of course, you’re plagiarizing those songbirds?”

“Borrowing, Black, borrowing. If a milkmaid, singing at dawn, can have her hum borrowed by Berlioz, well! Or if Dvorak, hearing a Dixie banjo plucker pluck ‘Goin’ Home,’ steals the banjo to eke out his New World, why can’t I weave a net to catch a tune? There! Finito. Done! Give us a title, Black!”

“I? Who sings off-key?”

“What about ‘The Emperor’s Nightingale’?”

“Stravinsky.”

“‘The Birds’?”

“Hitchcock.”

“Damn. How’s this: ‘It’s Only John Cage in a Gilded Bird’?”

“Brilliant. But no one knows who John Cage was.”

“Well, then, I’ve got it!”

And he wrote:

“‘Forty-seven Magpies Baked in a Pie.’”

“Blackbirds, you mean; go back to John Cage.”

“Bosh!” Fentriss stabbed the phone. “Hello, Willie? Could you come over? Yes, a small job. Symphonic arrangement for a friend, or friends. What’s your usual Philharmonic fee? Eh? Good enough. Tonight!” Fentriss disconnected and turned to gaze at the tree with wonder in it. “What next?” he murmured.

“Forty-seven Magpies,” with title shortened, premiered at the Glendale Chamber Symphony a month later with standing ovations, incredible reviews.

Fentriss, outside his skin with joy, prepared to launch himself atop large, small, symphonic, operatic, whatever fell on his ears. He had listened to the strange choirs each day for weeks, but had noted nothing, waiting to see if the “Magpie” experiment was to be repeated.

When the applause rose in storms and the critics hopped when they weren't skipping, he knew he must strike again before the epilepsy ceased.

There followed: "Wings," "Flight," "Night Chorus," "The Fledgling Madrigals," and "Dawn Patrol," each greeted by new thunderstorms of acclamation and critics angry at excellence but forced to praise.

"By now," said Fentriss, "I should be unbearable to live with, but the birds caution modesty."

"Also," said Black, seated under the tree, waiting for a sprig of benison and the merest touch of symphonic manna, "shut up! If all those sly dimwit composers, who will soon be lurking in the bushes, cop your secret, you're a gone poacher."

"Poacher! By God, yes!" Fentriss laughed. "Poacher."  
And damn if the first poacher didn't arrive!

Glancing out at three in the morning, Fentriss witnessed a runty shadow stretching up, handheld tape recorder poised, warbling and whistling softly at the tree. When this failed, the half-seen poacher tried dove-coos and then orioles and roosters, half dancing in a circle.

"Damn it to hell!" Fentriss leaped out with a shotgun cry: "Is that Wolfgang Prouty poaching my garden? Out, Wolfgang! Go!"  
Dropping his recorder, Prouty vaulted a bush, impaled himself on thorns, and vanished.

Fentriss, cursing, picked up an abandoned notepad.

"Nightsong," it read. On the tape recorder he found a lovely Satie-like bird-choir.

After that, more poachers arrived midnight to depart at dawn. Their spawn, Fentriss realized, would soon throttle his creativity and still his

voice. He loitered full-time in the garden now, not knowing what seed to give his beauties, and heavily watered the lawn to fetch up worms.

Wearily he stood guard through sleepless nights, nodding off only to find Wolfgang Prouty's evil minions astride the wall, prompting arias, and one night, by God, perched in the tree itself, humming in hopes of sing-alongs.

A shotgun was the final answer. After its first fiery roar, the garden was empty for a week. That is, until—  
Someone came very late indeed and committed mayhem.

As quietly as possible, he cut the branches and sawed the limbs.  
"Oh, envious composers, dreadful murderers!" cried Fentriss.

And the birds were gone.  
And the career of Amadeus Two with it.  
"Black!" cried Fentriss.

"Yes, dear friend?" said Black, looking at the bleak sky where once green was.  
"Is your car outside?"  
"When last I looked."  
"Drive!"

But driving in search didn't do it. It wasn't like calling in lost dogs or telephone-poled cats. They must find and cage an entire Mormon tabernacle team of soprano springtime-in-the-Rockies birdseed lovers to prove one in the hand is worth two in the bush.

But still they hastened from block to block, garden to garden, lurking and listening. Now their spirits soared with an echo of "Hallelujah Chorus" oriole warbling, only to sink in a drab sparrow twilight of despair.

Only when they had crossed and recrossed interminable mazes of asphalt and greens did one of them finally (Black) light his pipe and emit a theory.

“Did you ever think to wonder,” he mused behind a smoke-cloud, “what season of the year this is?”

“Season of the year?” said Fentriss, exasperated.

“Well, coincidentally, wasn’t the night the tree fell and the wee songsters blew town, was not that the first fall night of autumn?” Fentriss clenched a fist and struck his brow.

“You mean?”

“Your friends have flown the coop. Their migration must be above San Miguel Allende just now.”

“If they are migratory birds!”

“Do you doubt it?”

Another pained silence, another blow to the head.

“Shit!”

“Precisely,” said Black.

“Friend,” said Fentriss.

“Sir?”

“Drive home.”

It was a long year, it was a short year, it was a year of anticipation, it was the burgeoning of despair, it was the revival of inspiration, but at its heart, Fentriss knew, just another Tale of Two Cities, but he did not know what the other city was!

How stupid of me, he thought, not to have guessed or imagined that my songsters were wanderers who each autumn fled south and each springtime swarmed north in a cappella choirs of sound.

“The waiting,” he told Black, “is madness. The phone never stops—”



The phone rang. He picked it up and addressed it like a child. “Yes. Yes. Of course. Soon. When? Very soon.” And put the phone down. “You see? That was Philadelphia. They want another Cantata as good as the first. At dawn today it was Boston.

Yesterday the Vienna Philharmonic. Soon, I say. When? God knows. Lunacy! Where are those angels that once sang me to my rest?” He threw down maps and weather charts of Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, and the Argentines.

“How far south? Do I scour Buenos Aires or Rio, Mazatlán or Cuernavaca? And then? Wander about with a tin ear, standing under trees waiting for bird-drops like a spotted owl? Will the Argentine critics trot by scoffing to see me leaning on trees, eyes shut, waiting for the quasi-melody, the lost chord?

I’d let no one know the cause of my journey, my search, otherwise pandemoniums of laughter. But in what city, under what kind of tree would I wander to stand? A tree like mine? Do they seek the same roosts? or will anything do in Ecuador or Peru? God, I could waste months guessing and come back with birdseed in my hair and bird bombs on my lapels. What to do, Black? Speak!”

“Well, for one thing”—Black stuffed and lit his pipe and exhaled his aromatic concepts—“you might clear off this stump and plant a new tree.”

They had been circling the stump and kicking it for inspiration. Fentriss froze with one foot raised. “Say that again?!”

“I said—”

“Good grief, you genius! Let me kiss you!”

“Rather not. Hugs, maybe.”

Fentriss hugged him, wildly. “Friend!”

“Always was.”

“Let’s get a shovel and spade.”

“You get. I’ll watch.”

Fentriss ran back a minute later with a spade and pickax. “Sure you won’t join me?”

Black sucked his pipe, blew smoke. “Later.”

“How much would a full-grown tree cost?”

“Too much.”

“Yes, but if it were here and the birds did return?”

Black let out more smoke. “Might be worth it. Opus Number Two: ‘In the Beginning’ by Charles Fentriss, stuff like that.”

“‘In the Beginning,’ or maybe ‘The Return.’”

“One of those.”

“Or—” Fentriss struck the stump with the pickax. “‘Rebirth.’” He struck again. “‘Ode to Joy.’” Another strike. “‘Spring Harvest.’” Another. “‘Let the Heavens Resound.’ How’s that, Black?”

“I prefer the other,” said Black.

The stump was pulled and the new tree bought.

“Don’t show me the bill,” Fentriss told his accountant. “Pay it.”

And the tallest tree they could find, of the same family as the one dead and gone, was planted.

“What if it dies before my choir returns?” said Fentriss.

“What if it lives,” said Black, “and your choir goes elsewhere?”

The tree, planted, seemed in no immediate need to die. Neither did it look particularly vital and ready to welcome small singers from some far southern places.

Meanwhile, the sky, like the tree, was empty.

“Don’t they know I’m waiting?” said Fentriss.

“Not unless,” offered Black, “you majored in cross-continental telepathy.”

“I’ve checked with Audubon. They say that while the swallows do come back to Capistrano on a special day, give or take a white lie, other migrating species are often one or two weeks late.”

“If I were you,” said Black, “I would plunge into an intense love affair to distract you while you wait.”

“I am fresh out of love affairs.”

“Well, then,” said Black, “suffer.”

The hours passed slower than the minutes, the days passed slower than the hours, the weeks passed slower than the days. Black called. “No birds?”

“No birds.”

“Pity. I can’t stand watching you lose weight.” And Black disconnected.

On a final night, when Fentriss had almost yanked the phone out of the wall, fearful of another call from the Boston Symphony, he leaned an ax against the trunk of the new tree and addressed it and the empty sky.

“Last chance,” he said. “If the dawn patrol doesn’t show by seven A.M., it’s quits.”

And he touched ax-blade against the tree-bole, took two shots of vodka so swiftly that the spirits squirted out both eyes, and went to bed.

He awoke twice during the night to hear nothing but a soft breeze outside his window, stirring the leaves, with not a ghost of song.

And awoke at dawn with tear-filled eyes, having dreamed that the birds had returned, but knew, in waking, it was only a dream.

And yet . . . ?

Hark, someone might have said in an old novel. List! as in an old play.

Eyes shut, he fine-tuned his ears . . .

The tree outside, as he arose, looked fatter, as if it had taken on invisible ballasts in the night.

There were stirrings there, not of simple breeze or probing winds, but of something in the very leaves that knitted and purled them in rhythms. He dared not look but lay back down to ache his senses and try to know.

A single chirp hovered in the window.  
He waited.  
Silence.

Go on, he thought.  
Another chirp.  
Don't breathe, he thought; don't let them know you're listening.  
Hush.

A fourth sound, then a fifth note, then a sixth and seventh.

My God, he thought, is this a substitute orchestra, a replacement choir come to scare off my loves?

Another five notes.

Perhaps, he prayed, they're only tuning up!

Another twelve notes, of no special timbre or pace, and as he was about to explode like a lunatic conductor and fire the bunch—

It happened.

Note after note, line after line, fluid melody following spring freshet melody, the whole choir exhaled to blossom the tree with joyous proclamations of return and welcome in chorus.

And as they sang, Fentriss sneaked his hand to find a pad and pen to hide under the covers so that its scratching might not disturb the choir that soared and dipped to soar again, firing the bright air that flowed from the tree to tune his soul with delight and move his hand to remember.

The phone rang. He picked it up swiftly to hear Black ask if the waiting was over. Without speaking, he held the receiver in the window. "I'll be damned," said Black's voice.

"No, anointed," whispered the composer, scribbling Cantata No. 2. Laughing, he called softly to the sky.

"Please. More slowly. Legato, not agitato."

And the tree and the creatures within the tree obeyed.

Agitato ceased.

Legato prevailed.

The end