

PRAISE FOR
SONATA IN WAX

“*Sonata in Wax* is a terrific novel—immersive, compelling, smart, the story propelled by a cast of complex, full-bodied characters and the author’s absolute mastery of the musical worlds he conjures...I’m knocked flat with admiration for this splendid novel.”

—Ben Fountain, author of *Devil Makes Three*

“*Sonata in Wax* is an absolutely gorgeous novel. . . . I was reminded of Ian McEwan in the way that small details are used to build a big scene, and in the nuance Hamlin brings to Ben’s conflict over revealing the truth about the sonata. *Sonata* is a beautifully told mystery. I loved it.”

—Jane Harper, author of *The Dry*

“*Sonata in Wax* is lush with music, mystery, and lyrical prose. Edward Hamlin manages to take the story of a lost sonata and transform it into a literary symphony. A wonderful debut novel!”

—Dominic Smith, author of *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*

“In Edward Hamlin’s brilliant novel, past and present merge when a lost sonata’s restored beauty sheds light on the ravages of war and intergenerational trauma. Both epic and intimate, *Sonata in Wax* is a triumph of storytelling.”

—Brendan Neil Casey, author of *She That Lay Silent-like upon Our Shore*

“What a feast! Edward Hamlin’s *Sonata in Wax* gives us a dual-timeline musical mystery, conducted in sentences every bit as lyrical as their subject matter. This beautiful, compelling novel demonstrates the timelessness and transcendence of music, even as we flounder through our own self-designed ruin. I’m so glad I read this book.”

—Erika Krouse, author of *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation*

“*Sonata in Wax* is a masterful tale of art and ambition, war and illness, desire and discovery. Exquisitely crafted and vividly attuned to the intricacies of its fascinating characters, Hamlin’s novel sweeps across a century, unfurling the secrets of a sonata that becomes at once a totem of genius and the forbidden. I’ve rarely read a novel where music is such an astounding life force of its construction. This is a beautiful book, symphonic in scale, immersive in its depths, and morally complex in vision.”

—Steven Schwartz, author of *The Tenderest of Strings*

“*Sonata in Wax* is pitch perfect. Like the mysterious musical composition at its heart, the novel twists and plumbs towards a tumultuous and satisfying finish. Part homage and part elegy, *Sonata in Wax* celebrates musical heritage, and honors the unsung heroes whose ingenuity and sacrifice help art and humanity survive.”

—Rachel Swearingen, author of *How to Walk on Water*

“With the beauty and build of great classical music, *Sonata in Wax* interweaves a modern-day mystery with a World War I-era drama to create a novel unlike any I’ve read. Hamlin’s characters resonate with vitality, their struggles with poignancy and danger. When the threads finally entwine and the crescendo arrives, it does so with symphonic force. *Sonata in Wax* is a bravura performance from a writer at the top of his game.”

— Paul Cohen, author of *The Glamsback*

SONATA IN WAX

A NOVEL BY
EDWARD HAMLIN

Sonata in Wax

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Since I was able to enjoy everything this sonata had to give me only in a succession of hearings, I never possessed it in its entirety: it was like life itself. But, less disappointing than life, great works of art do not begin by giving us the best of themselves.

— Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*

THE SONATA

Prélude

Andante

Allegro

Adagio

Appassionato

PRÉLUDE

THE MUSIC is a fold in time. Given just a few piano notes—the quiet opening phrase, say, hovering like smoke—Ben is transported straight back to the moment of discovery, every detail of time and place intact. The muted, undersea lighting of the Studio A control booth where he’s sat beside Itzhak Perlman and Daniel Barenboim and so many other brilliant players over the years, listening to breathtaking music recorded only moments before. The companionable glow of his meters and indicator lights. The tang of stale coffee from a mug forgotten atop the microphone safe. The smooth glide of the faders under his expert fingers. And the vague sense of Chicago, somehow, roaring about its business just beyond the soundproof walls, the subsonic rumble of buses and the screech of El trains, the airhorns trumpeting from the ballpark, the snatches of mariachi and hip-hop and rowdy banter along the sidewalks—the city’s soundscape felt rather than heard, a raucous shivaree that never lets up.

All this will snap back in an instant whenever Ben hears even the smallest fragment of the lost sonata, blazing through his heart without losing a single watt of its electricity.

THE PIECE HAUNTS HIM LIKE the voice of a missing child. Tender and untouchable, it murmurs in the back of his mind as he wanders home from the studio on rainy evenings, sings to him as he dawdles over his solitary dinners. The unknown pianist churns through darker chords as Ben hurries past the hallway mirror, then listens in bemused silence when he sits down at the piano to unwind with a little jazz. On some mornings he’s jolted awake by the breakneck Allegro and springs from bed feeling better than ever, perfectly steady on his feet, almost fully recovered—only to have the music snatch its energy back, and his along with it. But as mercurial as the sonata is, he’s grateful for its company when the house fills with stillness, when all is a little too quiet in his life.

For weeks now Ben's kept his discovery to himself. He's played the strange piece for no one. In every spare moment, meanwhile, he's hammered away at his amateurish research, trying to identify composer and performer, trying to make musical sense of what he's hearing. He's listened to the crackly recording countless times, by day and by night, at home and at work, on cheap earbuds and on Studio A's thirty-thousand-dollar speaker rig. But the deeper he goes, the more he's aware of his own limitations. It's a job for a scholar, not an enthusiast. More often than not it feels like a lost cause, a problem with no real solution. Pure folly.

He forges ahead nevertheless, because he has to. He can't let it go. Night after night, day after day, he scours the literature on early twentieth-century French piano music, listening to Debussy and Ravel and Satie for hours on end until the fierce ringing in his left ear forces him to stop. Like some befuddled philosopher he fills a notebook with stray facts, wild guesses, tenuous theories that only confuse him more, bringing him no closer to the answers he needs. The only thing that's clear, lately, is that he's badly out of his depth. While it's true that there's an expensive piano in his living room and a piano performance diploma somewhere in a bottom drawer of his life, he's just never done this kind of detective work. Wrung out, he loses heart and gives up. Then begins again.

AT TIMES HE'S WISHED ROBIN WAS THERE to kick around ideas, then reminded himself of all the reasons why it's better she's not. Though everything's changed between them, he certainly hasn't forgotten her profound musical intuition, the way she can go straight to the heart of a piece on the very first hearing. It's one of the many things that make her such a fine musician.

Robin would hear things in the sonata he doesn't. She'd take it apart measure by measure, study its inner workings and reassemble it without missing a beat, quickly grasping the composer's ambitions. He's watched her do it a thousand times. Bartók, Górecki, even Bach—he owes his love for each of them largely to her. The memory of listening

to music with his brilliant wife, of hearing her revel in its glories late into the night, is precious to him.

There are other moments Ben misses—so many. The way she'd nestle against his neck, jet-lagged and exhausted, when he'd collect her at O'Hare after a grueling tour, horns blaring in the arrivals lane, her body releasing itself into his like a quiet shift of earth. On summer mornings, the scent of sleep she'd leave on the pillow if she rose before he did. On winter evenings, stretched out on the sofa opposite one another with her feet tucked against his chest, the wriggle of her toes inside socks stolen from his drawer. The tiny tattoo of a sixteenth note on the inside of her thigh, so high up that only a lover or a doctor would ever come across it.

In the back of the bedroom closet there's a grocery bag with a black sweater crumpled inside it, a stray left behind in the chaos of her move-out. A few filaments of fine bronze hair still cling to the cashmere, a fading trace of her Lancôme. At the bottom of the bag is a register slip listing the ingredients for a dinner they must have shared, long ago: lemon risotto with prawns, he's deduced, an arugula salad, the lazy splurge of a store-bought blueberry pie. An ordinary Saturday evening in their long life together. Robin making the salad, he the risotto. A glass of yesterday's wine passed back and forth between them while they cook. Ben's known about the grocery bag and its contents for some time now but leaves it just where it is, wary of its power to harm him. Or perhaps he's holding it in reserve—for what, exactly, he couldn't say.

If she were still in his life they'd listen to the sonata according to their old ritual, lying side by side in darkness on the Moroccan tribal rug in the living room, the music spreading over them like a Saharan sky full of stars. But Robin's not here: in the darkness it's only him, alone with the starry mystery of a piece of music he may never fully understand.

GENIUS IS THE ONLY WORD for what Ben hears on that first late-summer afternoon in Studio A. Cueing up the digitized recording, the Counterpoint staff already scattering into the stifling city streets on bikes and buses, he has no inkling of the explosion the sonata's about

to set off in his life. He certainly can't imagine how quickly it will turn him into a liar and a fool. Auditioning the century-old track is a last chore to be knocked off before going home, nothing more.

He clicks the Play button. A percussive pop, then a long stretch of dead air . . . though *dead* is hardly the word for the chaos that bursts from the monitors. The sound is more like a sky full of locusts. There's no telling what lies on the other side of it. Ben tilts back in his chair, interrogating the spitting noise with a specialist's ear, already considering ways to neutralize it. He's been at this for three decades now and is among the best in the business, but he's no miracle worker. The hiss and crackle threaten to smother the music the moment it's born. But the noise may be the least of his worries. At four seconds there's a sudden dropout: the needle plunges into a divot on the original recording surface, gouging into the wax like a power tool, an excruciating shriek filling the control booth. The digital track replicates the analog disaster with the grim fidelity of a photographer at a hanging. Ben trims his faders quickly, bringing the gain down so it's bearable. But after a few beats the needle claws its way back out of the rut. Seeing its opening, the static roars back in with a vengeance, loose and feral, back on the warpath. There's no stopping it now.

At last—a relief—the invisible pianist arrives. Four notes pirouette through the control booth, lighter than air. Despite the hiss and crackle, despite the ten long decades that have passed since the player touched the keys, the final note rings like a chime. To Ben's practiced ear it sounds like the performer's in a small, resonant space, maybe a music room or salon, certainly not a hall. Even on the crude recording he can hear the sonic signature of a quality piano—a ballroom grand, if he had to guess, a bit too big for the room. But after the brief arpeggio the music disappears without a trace. The pianist absconds from the scene.

Ben nudges his faders up: nothing but noise. The pianist's gone off the air.

"That's it?" he says, puzzled. "Can't be."

Only after five seconds, far longer than his musical sense tells him is right, is the opening phrase answered by another. The sonata tumbles headlong into a minor key, landing on a moody, complex chord that utterly delights him. He didn't see this coming, after the feather-light, optimistic opening notes. Through the roaring locusts, a darker bell tolls. A conversation begins. Ben shifts in his chair, intrigued.

As the sonata unfolds he listens with rising excitement. He's fascinated by the sly feints and attacks, the daring melodic turns, the thread of dissonance that shuttles through the playing. Jazz chords surface and then vanish without explanation, decades ahead of their time. At a certain point the pianist sprints into double time, then triple time, ripping through a passage so devilishly complex that Ben can't begin to track it. The music is boundlessly curious, eager to trespass and transgress and build anew. Even today it would be considered avant-garde—how could it possibly be a century old? And the unknown player is a virtuoso by any measure. Every second of the recording beguiles.

Ben scrambles to his feet and begins to pace the room with hands shoved in jeans pockets, galvanized by what he's hearing, incapable of sitting still. His legs waver under him, weak and fickle; his head spins with a faint sidereal wobble. When he passes the studio door he has to clutch the handle to keep from falling off his feet. But the invisible pianist has shifted him completely outside of himself. For once his body's failures barely distress him.

The hiss on the old recording no longer matters, either. The ravishing music shakes it off like a dusting of snow. He certainly never expected anything like this. He was expecting—dreading—fifteen or twenty minutes of tedious, homemade parlor music, a bit of shaky Gilbert and Sullivan or Couperin played by some well-meaning amateur a century ago. What's flowing from the monitors on this Chicago afternoon is on another plane entirely. It's the direct transmission of a vision. As the recording comes to a close Ben sees the lost sonata for what it is: a dream of modernity, dazzling and feverish and wild as only the truest dreams are.

FIRST MOVEMENT

Andante

Andante

CHICAGO
SEPTEMBER 2018

I.
EDISON COMES HOME

AFTER LOCKING UP THE STUDIO on that first evening Ben walks slowly home through the sweltering city, a bulky package tucked into his messenger bag. MR. BENJAMIN WEIL, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, COUNTERPOINT STUDIOS reads the carefully typed label, CONFIDENTIAL. The return address is for the Wooden Arabian, an antique shop in Belfast, Maine. Inside the package sits a spirited letter from one Willa Blount, a set of five wax recording cylinders in bubble wrap, and a jump drive with the raw audio he's been listening to—a first digital capture of the original recording, etched into the cylinders while the Great War was raging.

The house is quiet and cool, a blessed refuge. Ben's planned on his usual jog along the lakeshore before fixing dinner, but after a long walk home through marshy heat and bus exhaust it's the last thing he cares to do. And there's a question of balance: only yesterday, veering onto the easy gravel path along Montrose Harbor, he'd stumbled over nothing at all and fallen hard, skinning his knees like a boy knocked down in a schoolyard fight. Hardly serious damage—more of an embarrassment, really, when a watery-eyed old man helped him to his feet—but distressing nonetheless. It wasn't the first time he'd fallen for no reason.

"See somebody, for chrissakes," the old man said as Ben picked gravel from the heel of his hand. "A doctor! You fell why? Ask yourself." The man leaned in, crowding him. "Look, I was an oral surgeon for forty-eight years," he rasped before shuffling off in his rubber sandals, his authority on all medical matters thus established. The odd encounter, coming on the heels of a fall that never should have happened, dogged Ben all the way home.

The old man had a point. Between bouts of vertigo and the urgent ringing in his left ear it's become harder to pretend nothing's wrong. He should see a doctor—yes—but the thought of it only makes his head

spin faster. The plain truth is that he's been losing control of his body since June and has done nothing to find out why.

Instead he's tried to seize back the wheel, tried to power through. Sometimes a run tamps down the vertigo; sometimes it throws him to the ground. Alcohol deadens the ringing, but a second glass of wine can send him reeling. Long work days take his mind off the situation for a while, then fatigue makes the ceiling spin when he lies down to sleep. Through the endless nights his thoughts stumble down one blind alley after another, colliding with brain tumors, Parkinson's, ALS, maladies he's never heard of, diseases his fear conjures out of thin air.

The final weeks with his mother, paralyzed in her hospice bed by the spinal cord tumor that would kill her, are never far from his thoughts. In the early stages Sylvia Weil stumbled too, reeling around her spotless apartment like a woman on a bender, toppling stools and end tables, terrifying herself. Ben can't help but relive it. It's all too easy to line up his symptoms against hers. Yet in the morning he gets to his unsteady feet and tries to go about his day as if nothing's wrong. Clings to his routines stubbornly, knowing in his heart that he can't outrun whatever's chasing him.

At this moment, though, his head is still and steady. Ben scoops the mail from under the slot and flips quickly through the circulars and *To Resident* clutter, his thoughts elsewhere. The sticky walk home has left him wanting a shower. For fifteen minutes he lets the splashing water settle his mind, the stream not much warmer than the atmosphere outside. After putting on clean clothes he opens a beer and settles himself at the dining room table, unbuckling the messenger bag in his dead-quiet home.

With curatorial care Ben unwraps the package from the Wooden Arabian, sets the envelope aside and undoes the bubble wrap to lay bare the relics, source of his delight.

A bronze sun angles through the windows to set the room aglow. Before him on the table sit five cylindrical boxes a little smaller than soup cans, the old cardboard abraded and tallow colored. EDISON GOLD MOULDED RECORDS, the labels read, ECHO ALL OVER THE

WORLD. On the back of each box is a cameo of the famous inventor, debonair and intense, the deep-set eyes suggesting late nights at the lab bench, the bow tie knotted with an engineer's precision. The signature below the portrait has a look of painstaking penmanship about it, as if the signer were a schoolboy not entirely comfortable with cursive.

The lid of each box is hand-labeled with the word *Sonata*—as if anyone would know exactly which sonata—followed by a sequence number. The piece must have been recorded in sections to overcome the limitations of the medium. In the studio this afternoon, as a first order of business, Ben had spliced the digital files together to get a sense of the whole, planning to smooth the transitions later.

He nudges the cap off one of the boxes. Inside, cosseted in batting, sits a rigid spool, precision-turned like a machine part. Ben plucks it out and stands it on the table, feeling all his breath leave him in a gust. It's a thing of beauty: a perfect cylinder of cobalt blue, lustrous and refined as a hand-blown vase. It is also, unmistakably, a piece of vintage technology, casually elegant in the manner of hand-tooled brass telescopes and tortoiseshell fountain pens. Whoever chose such a blue had something to say to the world, something to sing out. It's hard to imagine it was the magician of Menlo Park.

But what matters is the signal the cylinder carries. Leaning in close, Ben can just make out the faint pattern of grooves etched by a long-ago stylus, interrupted in several places by cruel nicks and a wandering hair-line scratch: the wayward path of the sonata, rutted as a back-country trail.

As he studies the cylinder, the sun dips below the house across the street and casts the relics into shadow. At the same moment he becomes aware of the scent of meat on a grill. Somehow it's slipped through the air conditioning and into the house. Incredible that the neighbors would think to barbecue in such punishing weather, but it wouldn't be the first time. Life rattles on regardless. A child's squeal twirls up the gangway and disappears, then reappears somewhere behind the house next door.

The beautiful Farahani kids—gifted with Persian genes on their father’s side, Minnesota Swedish genes on their mother’s—will be roistering in the backyard, oblivious to the heat, as their father Behrouz prods at kebabs with the same hellbent zeal he brings to everything. Nothing slows the man down. Lean as a greyhound, he’ll be sweating out Coronas now as fast as he can put them away. Meanwhile Eva Farahani will be occupying herself in her cool kitchen. Good people; good neighbors who took care of him when he needed it most, through the bleak winter months after Robin left. The scent of their dinner makes his stomach rumble.

In the dining room’s cool twilight Ben slips out Willa Blount’s letter and spreads it across the table, the tidy cursive pleasing to the eye. Surely the work of a fountain pen, which seems only fitting for an antiquarian. When he skimmed the letter this morning—his assistant setting up mikes for a session, the frazzled temp cursing at the laser printer, Ben’s office ablaze with summer sun whose heat bled right through the industrial-grade windows—he imagined his correspondent to be some starchy New England matron who was selling off family heirlooms to keep herself afloat. But no: Willa’s a bona fide antiques dealer, even if she seems to have no interest in selling the antiques sitting before him now. She’s entrusted them to him strictly in the name of music. Now that he’s heard the sonata, he can understand why.

II. KINDEST REGARDS

DEAR MR. WEIL, Willa writes,

Thank you for taking on my modest project. I'm told you're the best in the business, so if anyone can make sense of these recordings, I'm sure you can.

Enclosed are the original wax cylinders, as well as digitalized versions made by a client of mine who collects vintage Graphophones. Peter's extracted the audio to the best of his abilities, using (he asked me to tell you) a vintage Dog and Baby stylus purchased from an English specialty supplier. He's quite passionate about his work, so I assume he's recovered whatever can be saved, but please feel free to give it a go yourself. I'm sure you can scare up a functioning Graphophone in Chicago.

I believe the cylinders were part of the original inventory of my shop, which opened its doors in 1922. The ledger lists the consigner as simply "Family," with the offer price shown as "NFS." In our business that means Not for Sale, which is how the lot wound up in our overflow storage, tucked away who knows how many years ago in a mislabeled crate.

What will be more interesting to you is the descriptive note in the ledger. This indicates that the lot consisted of five Edison Gold Moulded wax cylinders, in fair condition, with contents identified as follows:

Oct. 1, 1917 home recording, Aigremont, Winchester Mass., first of five. American debut of Fr. piano sonata. Performed by J Garnier for an invited audience.

Sonata recording pt two.
 Sonata recording pt three.
 Sonata recording pt four.
 Sonata recording final pt.

I can add to this that “Aigremont” refers to the mansion of the Oren Sanborn family in Winchester, Massachusetts, just outside Boston—Oren was the son of James Solomon Sanborn, co-founder of Chase and Sanborn Coffee. C&S was a household name when I was a girl, but it’s pretty much disappeared now. About the only place you’ll find their coffee these days is in office supply stores, in a five-pound can with the Styrofoam cups and creamer and break room supplies. No great loss to the world of coffee, I suspect, though being a tea drinker myself I’m in no position to say.

I mentioned that the ledger identifies the Consigner as simply “Family.” This, too, points to the Sanborns. Why? Because the original owner of my shop was Oren’s daughter Helen, who grew up at Aigremont. At the time of the recording Helen would have been an eligible debutante; an heiress, technically, though the family fortune was being frittered away by a father with a weakness for show horses and yachts. All that coffee money spared Oren the need to work, but his pockets weren’t quite as deep as he thought. By the time his wife showed him the door he didn’t have two pennies to rub together. Aigremont was sold to speculators for a song.

After this unfortunate turn of events the Sanborns stopped reproducing entirely. Interesting, isn’t it? Like something from the animal kingdom. Only one Sanborn has survived to the present day, and she’s childless—when she’s gone, the line will be extinct.

All of which brings us round to the sonata. Of course the sound quality of the recording is poor, but I found the music astonishing, Mr. Weil—although bewildering might be the better word. I’m not ashamed to say that I didn’t understand a single note. But I’m

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as certain as certain can be that this sonata deserves to be heard. As does that pianist, J. Garnier, who's every bit as astonishing as the music itself, wouldn't you say?

So, then—while I hope you can improve on the audio quality, the music is what's important to me. That “American debut of Fr. piano sonata” note in the ledger certainly suggests it may be of historical interest. With your background and contacts in the classical music world, I'm hopeful you can identify it. It may be a known piece, nothing notable about it. Maybe you'll recognize it right out of the gate. But perhaps it's something far more precious. At this point I'd just like to know.

Enclosed is a check to get you launched. I hope it's enough. If so, please begin work. I'll anxiously await your report.

Kindest regards,

Willa S. Blount

BEN FOLDS THE LETTER and slips it back in the envelope, considering how to proceed. The first step, obviously, is to do what he can to restore the audio, work that will have to be squeezed in between recording sessions and studio business. It happens to be a particularly busy time at Counterpoint. The pianist Ana Clara Matta has several more Debussy *préludes* to record for her new CD, having fallen far behind schedule thanks to a hyperextended tendon. Then there is Jean Artigue, an acoustician who's traveling all the way from Paris to sonically map Studio A as part of some academic research project. In the midst of it all the Swiss soprano Constance Pik is flying in to perform with the Chicago Symphony, which means a concert, a CSO fundraiser, and a drop-in at Counterpoint where she recorded a set of Mozart arias, just after 9/11, that won her a Grammy. All of it will steal time from Willa Blount's sonata.

But already Ben feels the music sinking its hooks into him. It's like no piece of period music he's ever heard. Others were experimenting with dissonance in 1917, it's true, but the sonata's dissonant passages have an animal power to them that Schoenberg's bloodless investigations certainly never did. And the jazz passages—they're just inexplicable. Half a century ahead of their time, as if the composer had beamed into Birdland circa 1960 and taken everything he heard right back to the piano. To Ben's knowledge, some of the harmonic concepts behind them didn't even exist in 1917. The sonata is full of such mysteries. He'd like nothing more than to clear his calendar for it, to dig in and get to the bottom of things, but at the moment he doesn't have the luxury.

He gazes at the old cylinders standing before him on the dining room table. They gaze back, inscrutable and austere. One is turned so that the cameo of Edison is visible: the sly old inventor stares back from across the years, cagey and confident and by then unimaginably rich, Ben imagines. Even through the faded paper the ego sings out. Gathering the cylinders up gently, he crosses into the living room and arranges them on the music stand of the piano, where it seems to him they belong.

In the foyer the doorbell rings. He slips away to answer it, leaving the Edisons to confer in the gloaming.

Oliver Farahani stands on the stoop—taller than Ben at only fourteen, dark eyes flicking shyly downward, a platter of kebabs and rice in his hands. It's enough to feed a family of four.

"From us," the boy says and smiles nervously, slipping off into the murky heat before Ben can send back his thanks.

III.

ANA CLARA AT PLAY

IN THE MORNING Ana Clara Matta arrives late, as usual, for her Debussy session.

“Sorry, people,” she says as she strides past the reception desk. “The bloody rain.”

With an unapologetic smile she slips into the anteroom outside Studio A and stands her purple umbrella against the wall to dry. It’s not the weather that’s made her late; it’s her tendency to operate on Brazilian time. Despite a childhood spent in London as the daughter of Brazilian diplomats, she’s never lost her casual attitude toward clocks and calendars. It doesn’t matter to her that the billing clock starts running from the scheduled session time rather than the time of her arrival; it’s her record company’s money, and once she sits down to play she rarely needs more than a single take to nail a recording. What Ana Clara Matta lacks in punctuality she makes up for in efficiency. She’s famously well-rehearsed.

It’s been raining since sometime in the night, the storm settling in for a methodical siege. Scattered all through the Counterpoint loft are drenched backpacks, rain-slicked ponchos, soaked tennis shoes propped against vents to dry. Half the staff are barefoot. Even for a Friday the mood is casual. As the artist gets herself organized, slipping off jacket and boots and shaking out her damp black curls, a roll of thunder overwhelms the traffic noise down on Clybourn.

The maestra sends Ben a sharp look—is the storm going to be a problem?

Though the recording suites are heavily soundproofed, thunder does occasionally bleed through, ruining a take. Ben isn’t particularly concerned, having just seen to the installation of massive new bass traps behind the redwood walls.

“We’re fine,” he assures his artist. “How’s the arm?”

“The tendon’s shite. It’s the damp.” She holds out the slender forearm with its delicate gold bracelet and powerful hand, sliding up the sleeve and making a fist. “You see?”

He sees nothing amiss; only russet skin and a fine weave of muscles beneath it.

They sit down at the console to review her pieces. On the other side of the glass, Ben’s assistant, Eliza James, bends over the Steinway in headphones, rechecking her mike positions. Though they’ve used the same setup countless times, each player’s touch and body position are unique; the way a player hunkers down or rears back or sways with passion can subtly alter the recorded sound. It’s Eliza’s mastery of the nuances that makes her priceless.

Studio A is renowned for its flawless acoustics. The high, lovely redwood ceiling touches each note for a fleeting instant and sends it back sweetly, the 1.15-second reverberation time giving recordings just the spaciousness players crave. The thick Persian rug under the piano absorbs just enough of the ceiling’s reflections to tighten the signal. Complex baffles on the walls, custom-designed by one of the best acoustic engineers on the planet, keep the midrange orderly and clean. The result is a recorded sound that might as well have been captured inside the player’s own head. All this Eliza understands intimately. Meticulous and levelheaded, she’s been at Counterpoint for nearly fifteen years. With her in the suite Ben can devote full attention to his artists.

Just now he’s pretending to study the score for the *Canope* as Ana Clara walks him through it, cross-legged in black tights on the other chair, rimless bifocals perched on her small, beaked nose. She sings her way through certain phrases in double time, all business. At forty-six she’s considered one of the world’s foremost interpreters of French piano music; the Debussy CD will be her eleventh Counterpoint recording. Though her label has sprawling studios of its own in Los Angeles, she insists on recording here, with Ben Weil on the board. He’s the only producer she’ll work with.

Today’s *préludes* are brief and impressionistic, and Ben has no real engineering concerns. What catches his attention, spurred somehow by

the jasmine scent of his artist's damp curls, is Debussy's dynamic note at the top of the score: *Très calme et doucement triste*. Very calm and gently sad . . . how well the phrase might have described the man Ben was in those first untethered days after uncovering Robin's affair, before the anger roared in. Debussy knew.

AT THE PIANO, Ana Clara pulls on her famous Punjabi slippers with their goat-leather soles and ornate beadwork. There can be no performance without them. She once delayed a recital in Berlin for forty minutes while a panicked minder dashed from the Konzerthaus to the Ritz-Carlton to retrieve the forgotten footwear, an incident that did not amuse the Germans. Now she stretches her body systematically, curling left and right, twisting gently on the bench, working her fingers one by one. The troubled forearm receives a brisk, expert massage. She goes through her paces like a runner preparing for a championship sprint, her concentration supreme, her thin lips drawn to a frown.

"Go," she says finally, nodding toward the control booth, and with a click of the mouse Ben starts recording. Debussy's music begins to flow from the Steinway's hammers, pulsing across gold-spattered microphone diaphragms through cables and into the mixing console where it sets a bank of meters in motion. On the wide computer monitor a green waveform begins to scroll by, tracking the heartbeat of the *Canope*.

Ana Clara Matta's artistry floods through the low-lit studio like sunlight through rain, the Steinway crystal-clear, the music ineffable. Ben is so easily seduced by such moments. They still move him as nothing else can. He lets out a long sigh, unaware that his breathing is falling into step with the left-hand part of the Debussy, shadowing Ana Clara's every move.

Without thinking he nudges a fader up, watching his meters. On the technical level all is well. The sound is sweet and true. It's the player's emotion that captivates him—and, hovering just over his shoulder, the composer's. He does feel Debussy, or his idea of him, in the booth: a smoker's voice, a staccato laugh, a scent of hair oil. A way of walking into a room. Fingers nearly as slender as Matta's, nails trimmed like a surgeon's. The music makes it all perfectly clear.

BEN STUDIES HIS ARTIST through the soundproof window. The sleekly tapered back, arched slightly above the piano bench. The nest of dark curls, tied back with a cream scarf to accommodate the headphones that she, unusually among players at her level, prefers to wear. The Punjabi slippers, sure and sensitive on the pedals. As she comes to a minor phrase she closes her eyes and turns her narrow face toward the ceiling, leaning into it, only to bring her head back down in a long arc as she resolves to major. The hint of a smile crosses her face. She has so much to say to the composer. As Ben listens, it's as if he's eavesdropping, so intimately does she converse with Debussy's ghost, all her sensitivity and intelligence devoted to its handiwork.

There's a toughness to Ana Clara Matta that's always appealed to him. He knows little of her private life, really, apart from what the music press prints and her fellow musicians hint at. Like any flamboyant player she's the subject of endless gossip. She's loved and she's hated. None of which seems to touch her: she glides through the clouds of envy and adulation unperturbed, at most faintly amused. When loose comments about her are made in Ben's presence he holds his tongue like a discreet maître d', it being part of his code not to take sides.

Only since Robin's departure has he allowed himself to wonder about Ana Clara's life outside the studio. He knows she divides her time between Chicago, London, and Paris when not on tour. She despises her native Brazil for its corruption, though she did give one triumphal concert in São Paulo some years back. She's fluent in several languages, which flit through her conversation freely, favoring the native tongue of whatever composer she's currently playing.

When it comes to her romantic life, it's common knowledge that she's capable of real cruelty. Most notoriously, there was the incendiary breakup with Horst Lörber, an Austrian cellist Robin knew, who fainted dead away and nearly tumbled into the orchestra pit when she accused him before a sellout audience in Munich of sleeping with a male student. There was the magazine interview in which she dismissed the huge, abstract paintings of another ex by remarking drily that what she found so tiresome about him was the way he was constantly trying to

enlarge himself. And these were only the men. There are still the banal rumors of bisexuality—of an affair with an Italian writer spotted leaving Ana Clara's Florence hotel room at dawn, another with a beautiful nineteen-year-old pianist whose talent was suspiciously out of proportion to Maestra Matta's gushing praise.

There's little doubt that a good bit of the gossip is seeded by her manager, Sir Anthony Wooten, a British oddity as famous for his own sexual antics as for his alligator boots, rose cravat, and Anthony Eden homburg. It's Ant Wooten's job to keep the mantra *Ana Clara Matta* on everyone's lips, and he excels at it. He's almost certainly responsible for his client's latest moniker: The Animal. She's said to be quite proud of it.

BUT WHAT INTERESTS BEN is who she is when she's alone. He wants to know the mundane things. What books are on the nightstand in her Lincoln Park brownstone? What art on her walls? What food in her refrigerator? Does she use a pillow at night? Sleep on her back or her side? Talk in her sleep? (In which of her many languages?) What did she dream of last night as the storm rumbled in, knowing she'd be off to Counterpoint in the morning? Did Ben Weil flit through her unconscious, if only for an instant?

As she plays her way toward the final measures of the *prélude*, he tries to imagine her bedtime rituals. He watches her shake her curls out and slip her wiry body into a nightgown, brush her teeth with meticulous care while inspecting her sharp features in the mirror. Don the bifocals to delve into a book whose cover he can't quite bring into focus. In his fantasy she's exquisitely alone, her world solitary, under her perfect control. It's not occurred to him until this moment that the notorious Matta might sleep alone—but now his intuition tells him she does, even when there's a lover in her life. She'd protect the night's vulnerable, unguarded space for herself. She awoke alone today. He's almost sure of it.

“Et voilà,” she declares, the take finished. “What do you think?”

“Elegant,” Ben says without thinking. The truth is, he stopped listening to the music halfway through. “Happy with it?”

“Not sure about the pedal on this bit.” She plays a phrase adroitly. “Could be I lingered.”

“I’ll play it back.”

“Let’s hear it on the monitors.” She sets her headphones on the bench and slips into the control room with him.

Together they listen, her fists balled on the chair arms, one slipper dropped carelessly to the floor. She’s holding her breath with a sort of tantric concentration. When the passage in question arrives she leans toward the speakers and closes her eyes, lips moving silently, her whole body listening. Afterward she lets go of a long sigh that grazes his arm.

“*Ça marche*,” she decides. “It works. Let’s knock off the *Feux*.”

But she stays where she is, eyeing him. “I think you don’t like Debussy, do you? You might even be a Debussy hater, for all I know. Are you a Debussy hater, Ben?”

He nudges a fader up and down absently. Finds he can’t look at her. There’s some truth in what she says: Debussy’s impressionism often feels shapeless to him. It’s the same reason he dreads the obligatory pilgrimages, with out-of-town guests, to the Art Institute’s Monets. He prefers cleaner lines in his art. But there’s no need for Ana Clara Matta to know this. The truth is, Debussy’s music moves him only when she plays it.

“I like him fine,” he says.

“Liar.”

The harsh word leaves him speechless. If there’s one thing he’s not, it’s a liar. This has never been one of his failings. But when he steals a glance at her she’s laughing.

“So serious,” she says, and plays a feather-light arpeggio on his bare forearm. “Like some kind of *astronaut*.” And with this she’s gone, her jasmine scent lingering in the booth as she sits back down at the Steinway, his artist safely under glass once more.