

MUSIC AFTER MIDNIGHT

BY

Garrett Rowlan

As I grow older, sleeping is an issue. Oftentimes, insomnia and its avoidance, or abbreviation, informs my taste in music. This is especially true late at night, or early in the morning. By day I still enjoy listening to the bands of my youth, like Pink Floyd, Yes, and King Crimson and so forth, and yet more often than not the bands I remember from my teens, twenties, and thirties are objects of Wikipedia curiosity. I'll want to know the release date on such-and-such an album (my old record might be lost, sold—plenty of vinyl stores around LA—or scratched), how much would it cost to purchase the CD on Amazon, and when did such-and-such a musician die?

I listen differently these days. I rarely fantasize the way I used to, imagining myself on stage as the lead singer of popular or catchy songs with young, adoring females gathered at my feet, looking upward and swaying. This is a difficult fantasy when the mirror's wrinkles and liver spots suggest my adoring audience would wear corrective shoes, wigs, and clap while their walkers wait nearby. Age has a way of dispelling fantasy.

The fantasies completely disappear at night. I have the kind of insomnia that wakes me after midnight and often takes hours, or food, or various soporific measures to overcome. Auditory experiences are often a means of transition to the elusive realm of sleep. Novels on CD are a valuable tool in this way, but so is the classical station here in Los Angeles, a public radio station that I support. Music at midnight is a gateway to sleep and silence. A line from John Updike's novel *Roger's Version*, 1985, often occurs to me when I think of music, classical music, in the wee hours. "Music as I prefer it," Updike's eponymous narrator thinks, "on the verge of the inaudible."

And yet classical music after midnight verges not only on the inaudible—that is, unheard by me while in sleep—but opens a historical imagination. Certain classical pieces have the way of connecting me to a past long gone, one centuries old.

Pieces like Schubert's *Trout Quintet* bring thoughts of piscine arabesques, executed in the pure water of some antic stream. I am aware, writing this, that this image might have come from the cover of an RCA recording from 1962—the record purchased by me in the discount bin of a San Francisco shop in the early

seventies. I have it still. Somehow, that trout and its soundtrack can lull me back to sleep. Other pieces—Chopin’s piano nocturnes, for example—have the same effect. Mozart’s Symphony # 40 conjures at times an unsullied meadow and Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony of falling rain or a countryside gallop by horse. There are other pieces of music by otherwise obscure composers; some ditty scrawled on foolscap two-hundred years ago plays after 2 AM, bringing back to life something of an otherwise-forgotten composer. It’s a connection similar to what I hope happens with my writing.

Lately, and maybe it’s because my hearing isn’t what it used to be, even the sounds from the outside can have a smoothing effect, if they are modulated to my liking—the hiss of passing wheels at three in the morning (Who are they? Where are they going?), or the occasional footstep from the sidewalk, or a distant murmur from the apartment next door. Sometimes I hear distant conversations, a babble I can’t quite decipher that lingers as a faint trickle of another consciousness.

Ambient music has long become a favorite. The 1994 2-CD collection called *Ambient 4: Isolationism* introduced me to the genre. The liner notes were written by the musician Kevin Martin. He spoke of music that reflected a process whereby “stray signals from the city are melted down.” In my bed, awake after midnight, I am aware of this fusion of sounds, night, and solitude.

Maybe as I age, I am not learning to hear as much as learning to un-hear, to move my thinking to a silence beyond the sounds. “Heard melodies are sweet,” John Keats famously wrote, “but those unheard are sweeter.” That’s how it is with me: beyond the melody there are images, associations, and finally silence. That silence, a greater silence, draws closer as I pass seventy, until one day I will join the things I do not hear.

Until that time, however, I will remain listening beside the radio or the CD-player after midnight, or listening with those devices off, nerves and ears attuned to the rustle of my two cats, cars passing at intervals in the street, and the occasional human voice, a faint murmur in the early morning like a sound from a shared dream.

Author Biography

Garrett Rowlan is a retired Los Angeles teacher and resident in the northeast of that city. He has published about seventy stories, a novel, and a novella. His website is <https://garrettrowlan.com/>.