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Ophélie's Hornpipe

“Music is like a wind. It can drive ideas. It can carry almost any message. It can gather or dispel mists and fogs. But music is man-made. It is a means to an end. We let music act upon our unprotected psyche at our peril...”

The drummer raises the beater; then slowly and with conscious care withdraws intention. No more sound is needed.”

- Edwin Prévost, from “No Sound Is Innocent”

While in Bretagne last weekend, a provocative musical event occurred between me, a horse, and the dusky blue shades of evening. It was a mysterious event that left me both inspired and shaking. We arrived at Château Léauville after a long, drowsy bus ride from Concale. Stuffed from a luxurious oyster dinner, I decided to get some fresh air. I took my mandolin and walked outside to play a song for the horses.

Beneath the rustling of oak trees and amidst the shimmering tall grasses I spied Ophélie, a chestnut-brown mare, standing alone in the middle of a pasture. I walked beyond the shadow of the Château in the direction of the field, and when I got to the edge of the pasture I began to play. Listening to the fluttering of evening sparrows and the whispering of leaves overhead, I let my fingers move across the fingerboard and a sweet melody emerged.

Ophélie stopped grazing and looked up, then pivoted around and began to walk my way. Excited to have her attention (and a little bit nervous too—I find horses intimidating), I increased my picking speed and intensified my articulation, changing my tune from an air to a jaunty hornpipe. Her trot towards me quickened, head bobbing up and down and ears pointed in my direction. Eventually she stopped directly in front of me. She was about the length of my mandolin away, breathing softly, and undeniably animal in her presence, with pronounced muscles and veins and massive black eyes. I began the first chorus of my nameless tune again. She leaned in, closer and closer, curiously sniffing, her nose moving steadily closer. The tune I was playing was influenced by the traditional Bretagne music that we had heard earlier that day, bold and sure-footed, yet infused with sweet jauntiness and danceable momentum of the Celtic

tradition. I felt the communal nature and solemn melodic threads of the Bretagne music coming alive through my mandolin. I stood there with Ophélie, surrounded by the very specific sense of tranquility that comes with playing a small acoustic instrument in a big space.

I was reaching the end of the last stanza when the pivotal event occurred. Dusk was closing in around us, the leaves and the sky were beginning to grow indistinguishable. With every note, Ophélie drew closer. Soon, with her head bowed towards me and neck outstretched, her nose inched its way closer to my mandolin, the source of the sound which had attracted her. Closer, closer, and closer still, as my melody was coming to the end. I was on the last phrase when Ophélie, only centimeters away, placed her nose against the strings of my mandolin.

Suddenly, a start! A thunderous and immediate reaction. She reared up, snorted and exclaimed with huge commotion, with such power and lack of warning that I was completely stupefied: She wheeled around, and galloped across the pasture away from me. The last note of the song remained unplayed.

I left the field panting, in a daze. The ensuing silence was maddening. Trembling, I thought about the last few minutes before her outburst: I had been playing a song, just for her, uninterrupted in the peace of the pasture. It was a beautiful feeling, as though Ophélie and I were completely connected.

So what happened? Why did Ophélie leap away?

Or... is this really the question?

For the rest of the evening, I pondered what happened. I briefly thought that her contact with my instrument strings, wires so cold and metallic, vibrating like an insect's wings against her sensitive nose, could have been the cause of her dramatic start. It could also have been the direct contact with the source of the melodic mandolin phrases which had drawn her across the field that startled her. Or it could have been something unrelated to the music entirely, because animals (humans included) are inexplicable creatures, with motivations and actions that are often difficult to parse. She could have walked my way simply because she is accustomed to guests in her pasture. Perhaps it was me, not my music, which attracted her. The cause of Ophélie's reaction is of course debatable. But what about me? Why I was left feeling so shaken?

My experience with Ophélie was intimate, such that when the connection was broken on that last note I felt stranded, left in a void in the musical world that our interaction had created, our sound world. It was equatable to someone's cellphone ringing loudly in the middle of a performance of a Bach partita at the Concertgebouw, or the raspy squeak of a partially-fingered note on a clarinet in the middle of Messiaen's *Abyss of the Birds*. Or a sneeze during a quiet conversation. That's not to say that the event wasn't magical: Everyone I spoke with afterwards,

including Ophélie's loving owner Jean-François, smiled with delight at the thought of such an intimate, reactive musical moment between me and the horse. Perhaps by presupposing that the last note of the tune would end in a quaint and dainty final note from the mandolin, I became confused, even defensive or annoyed, when the expected result did not arrive, and a drastically different one took its place. I was unable to complete my own composition: My listener literally ran away with my final note.

During the minutes that passed between me and Ophélie that evening, our presence together created a true sound world, defined by the rustling of leaves and swishing of tall silvery grasses, shallow breathing, and meandering mandolin melodies, capped with an abrupt final outburst. In all, it was an acutely illuminated and refined vignette: just a space, an instrument, a player and a listener, with no preconceptions or expectations, improvisational and potentially volatile, a true conversation. Whatever the motivation behind her reaction, when Ophélie touched the strings of the instrument I was playing for her, in that moment, I felt that we were so intertwined that there was no distance between us at all. Though her outburst and my ensuing feelings inspired more questions than answers, it has set forth a fresh wave of inspiration for my ears and for my eyes, in search of those things in my sound world that invite me to move in closer.