

LBRIS

We know
books

Honeybees and Distant Thunder

RIKU ONDA

Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel



PENGUIN BOOKS

Theme

WHEN WAS THAT MEMORY FROM? I'm not sure.
I'd just learned to walk, so I couldn't have been much more than a toddler. Of that much I'm certain.

Far away, sunlight shone down, covering the world in its glow – cold, dispassionate, unstinting.

In that moment, the world to me felt bright, endless, forever trembling and wavering, a sublime yet terrifying place to be.

There was a faint, sweet fragrance mixed with the intense smell of greenery found only in nature.

A gentle breeze was blowing.

My body was enfolded in a rustling sound, gentle and cooling. I didn't know yet that this was the sound of leaves on the trees brushing against each other.

But there was something else.

I could see in the air a dense, lively shape that changed from moment to moment, growing smaller and then larger, constantly shifting.

I was still too young even to say *Mummy* or *Daddy*, yet I felt like I was already searching for a way to express something.

The words were in my throat, right there.

But first, another sound began to emerge, capturing my attention.

Like a sudden downpour.

It was powerful, bright.

Something – a wave, a vibration – rippled out.

As I listened, captivated, I felt as if my very being was immersed in it, and a calm settled on my heart.

If I could experience that moment again, I would describe it

as the astonishing sound of a swarm of bees buzzing over the top of a hill.

A sublime, magisterial music that filled the world!

Prelude

THE YOUNG MAN TURNED around at the intersection, startled. But it wasn't because a car had beeped at him.

He was in the middle of a major metropolis.

The cosmopolitan city centre of Europe, the number-one tourist destination in the world.

The pedestrians were of all nationalities, all shapes and sizes. A mosaic of different races filling the pavements, the mixture of languages waxing and waning like ripples.

This boy, who, by coming to a sudden halt, had disrupted the waves of passers-by flowing around him, was of medium build, but gave the impression he would soon shoot up even further. He looked fourteen, perhaps fifteen, and seemed the picture of youthful innocence.

He wore a cap, cotton trousers and a khaki-coloured T-shirt, along with a lightweight beige coat. An oversized canvas bag was slung diagonally across his shoulders. At first glance he looked like a typical teen, but there was something strangely free and easy about him.

He had an attractive Asian face beneath his cap, but his striking eyes and white skin made him seem, in a way, unplaceable.

He was looking up.

Oblivious to the traffic, his calm eyes were staring at one fixed point.

A small blond boy passing by with his mother followed the young man's gaze upwards, until his mother tugged him by the

hand, dragging him over to the other side of the crossing. The boy looked longingly back at the young man in the dark brown cap, before giving up to docilely follow his mother.

The young man, standing stock-still in the middle of the pedestrian crossing, finally realized the lights had changed, and walked swiftly across to the other side.

He'd definitely heard something.

As he adjusted the bag across his chest, he considered the sound he'd heard at the intersection.

The buzzing of honeybees.

A sound he'd known since he was a child, a sound he could never mistake.

Had they flown over from near the Hôtel de Ville perhaps?

He looked around, eyes searching, and when he spotted the large clock on the corner, he realized he was late.

I have to keep my promise, he told himself.

The young man pulled down his cap and ran off, his stride limber and supple.

MIEKO SAGA WAS USED TO being patient, but she realized with a start that she was about to fall asleep.

She stared about her, unsure where she was, but when she spotted the grand piano, and the young woman playing, she knew she must be in Paris.

Experience had taught her not to suddenly sit bolt upright and look around. Do that and people were sure to know you'd been snoozing. The trick was to gently place a hand to your temple, as if listening intently, and then shuffle a little in your seat, as if tired of holding the same position for so long.

But it wasn't just Mieko who had trouble staying awake. She knew for certain that the other music professors would be feeling exactly the same. Alan Simon, beside her, was a heavy smoker, and to go for so long without a nicotine fix, while listening to such appallingly tedious performances, must be driving him mad. Very soon his fingers would surely start to twitch.

On his other side, she knew that Sergei Smirnoff, sour-faced,

LIBRIS We know books
would be leaning his large frame against the table, not moving a muscle but thinking of when it would all be over and he'd be released to get to the bar for a drink.

Mieko was with them on that. She loved music, but also life and all its pleasures – cigarettes and alcohol included. All she wanted was to be set free from this painful trial so that, together, they could have a drink and gossip.

Auditions for the Yoshigae International Piano Competition were being held in five cities around the world: in Moscow, Paris, Milan, New York and in the Japanese city of Yoshigae itself. Apart from in Yoshigae, the auditions were all taking place in the concert halls of famous music schools.

Mieko was aware there'd been complaints about her and the other two judges being selected to oversee the Paris auditions, and indeed they had each manoeuvred behind the scenes to ensure this outcome. They were regarded among the cohort of judges as the bad boys, who loved a drink and were always ready with a scathing review.

But they still took pride in their ear for music. Maybe their behaviour wasn't the best, but they had established a reputation for spotting originality. If anyone was going to discover a bright new name among those who'd been initially dismissed, it would be them. Of this they were certain.

But even they were now beginning to lose their concentration.

Earlier on there had been two or three pianists who seemed promising, but the performances that followed had dashed all Mieko's hopes.

What they were on the lookout for was a *star*.

In all there were twenty-five candidates. They were now up to number fifteen, with ten more to go. She began to feel a little faint. It was at this point that the same thought crossed her mind again: being a judge was a new form of torture.

Listening to the endless permutations of Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, she felt like she was fading away.

She knew from the moment a pianist began to play if they

had a special spark. Some of her colleagues boasted they could tell the moment a performer stepped on to the stage. Indeed, some young pianists did have an aura about them, and even if they didn't, it was easy to discern in the first few minutes the quality of their playing. Dozing off was rude and unfeeling, but if a performer couldn't hold the interest of even a judge who had developed extra staying power, that pianist hadn't a hope of ever bonding with ordinary music fans.

Miracles never happen, after all.

Mieko was certain the other two were thinking the same thing.

The Yoshigae International Piano Competition was held every three years, and this year was the sixth time it had taken place. In recent years, the reputation of the Yoshigae competition had grown. Winners were beginning to move on to scoop prizes in more famous contests. Yoshigae had quickly won a name as an event for emerging talent.

The winner of the last Yoshigae had actually failed the initial application screening. So there were naturally great hopes for the current auditions, as the entrants were well aware of the previous competition's Cinderella story.

But even this winner had come from a well-known music school, and had only been turned down initially because he was too young to have gained the requisite experience from other competitions. In reality there was seldom much of a gap between the application screening and the pianist's actual ability. If someone had, from a young age, distinguished themselves through diligent practice, and had been taught by a renowned teacher, they would rise to fame. The truth was that if someone couldn't handle that type of life, then they would never become a noted pianist. It was impossible that some unknown would show up out of nowhere and become a star. Occasionally some prize pupil of a doyen of the music scene would appear, but their pampered grooming only made it harder for them to fly the nest. A concert pianist had to have nerves of steel. The pressures of numerous competitions demanded enormous physical and mental strength,

LIBRIS We know books
and without those qualities no one could survive the gruelling
tours of a professional concert pianist.

But still scores of young hopefuls showed up at the piano,
and there seemed to be no end to them.

Having a good technique was the minimum requirement.
Even then, there was no guarantee you could become a true
musician. Even for those who turned professional, that didn't
mean their career would last. How many countless hours had
they spent labouring over the keys at the mouth of that terrifying
black monster, forgoing the pleasures of childhood, shouldering
all the hopes and expectations of their parents? Dreaming, all of
them, that one day they would be showered with thunderous
applause.

'Your profession and mine have a good deal in common.'

Mieko remembered Mayumi's words.

Mayumi Ikai was a friend from high school who had become
a popular mystery writer. Having grown up mainly abroad, Mieko
had spent only four years of her childhood in Japan, and Mayumi
was one of her very few friends there. Because of her father's car-
eer as a diplomat, Mieko had gone back and forth between Europe
and South America, and so didn't fit in well in Japan, where homo-
geneity was prized above all. The only close friendships she'd made
were with other loners like Mayumi. Even now they still met up
for a drink every once in a while, and Mayumi would make a com-
parison between the literary and classical-music worlds.

'They're so alike, aren't they?' she said on one occasion. 'You
have far too many piano competitions, and there are way too
many literary awards for new writers. You see the same people
applying for piano competitions all over, to gain prestige, and the
same holds true for all these literary prizes. In both fields, only a
handful of individuals are ever able to carve out a living. There
are tons of writers who want people to read their books, tons of
pianists who want people to listen to them, but both fields are in
decline, the number of readers and concert-goers gradually
shrinking.'

Mieko gave a forced smile. Throughout the world, fans of

classical music were indeed ageing, and the profession's daunt-
ing task was to somehow lure in younger audiences.

Mayumi went on.

'There's all that banging away at a keyboard too, and the fact
that, on the surface, both seem quite elegant professions. All
anyone else sees is the final product, the polished pianist on
stage, but in order to get there, we have to spend countless hours
quietly hidden away.'

'True enough,' Mieko agreed. 'We both spend hours banging
away at our respective keyboards.'

'For all that,' Mayumi said, 'both professions have to con-
stantly expand their horizons and bring in a steady flow of new
blood, or else you'd run out of leaders. The pie itself would shrink
as well. That's why everyone's always searching for that new face.'

'But the cost is different,' Mieko countered. 'You don't need
capital to write novels, but do you know how much we musicians
have invested?'

Mayumi was sympathetic. She nodded and started ticking
them off on her fingers.

'You have the cost of an instrument, music scores, lessons,'
she said. 'Expenses for recitals, flowers, clothes. Travel expenses,
if you study abroad. And – what else?'

'In some cases you have to pay rental fees for the concert
hall, and expenses for the staff. If you put out a CD, sometimes
you need to pay the costs for that. Then there's the cost of flyers
and advertising.'

'Not a business for poor people.' Mayumi shuddered and
Mieko grinned.

'But there's one important part, isn't there, where you have it
better than us writers,' Mayumi said. 'Music is understood wher-
ever you go in the world. There's no language barrier. Everyone
can share the same emotions. We writers have a language barrier,
and I'm so envious of musicians for that universality of language
and emotion.'

'You're right,' Mieko said and shrugged. It wasn't something
you could explain in words. So seldom did the investment of time

LIBRIS | We know books

and money pay off, yet once you experienced that *special moment* you felt a kind of joy that erased all the struggles you'd made to get there.

Every single one of us is seeking the same thing – craving, thirsting after that magical moment.

There were five dossiers left.

Five more pianists.

Mieko had begun to consider who among the competitors she was going to allow through. Based on what she'd heard, there was only one she felt comfortable passing. And there was one other who, if the other judges recommended them, might also pass. No one else was at the level she was looking for.

What always threw her at this point was the question of the order of the competitors. At first, she might think a pianist had done a good job, but was that really true? If she heard the same performance a second time, would she still feel the same? In auditions and competitions, order was destiny, and had a profound influence, and while she tried to make a clear distinction between order and ability, it still bothered her.

There had been two Japanese competitors so far, both studying at the Conservatoire here in Paris, and both of them had excellent technique. One of them she wouldn't mind passing if the other two judges were of the same mind, but unfortunately the other performer didn't impress her. When the technical level was this high, what you were left with to make a distinction between the competitors was a certain ineffable *something* that tugged at you, that grabbed you, in their playing. Pianists with outstanding technique or an obvious, appealing individuality were one thing, but there was a fine line separating those who passed from those who didn't. Competitors you wondered about, those that caused a bit of a stir, that you couldn't take your eyes off. When she was wavering, she'd rely on these inexpressible, vague feelings. Mieko's criteria came down to this: did she want to hear this pianist again, or not?

As she opened the next folder, the name caught her eye.

Jim Kazama.

Mieko made it a rule not to learn much background info about any of the contestants before the competition.

But she couldn't help examining this dossier closely.

The documents were in French, so she had no idea which characters would be used to write his name, but he did appear to be Japanese. The accompanying photograph showed a young man who looked both refined and a bit wild. He was sixteen.

What caught her attention was that the CV was mostly blank. No academic background, no experience in competitions. Nothing. He'd gone to elementary school in Japan but had then moved to France. That's all that could be gleaned from the CV.

It wasn't so very unusual that he hadn't attended a college of music. In the music world, where child prodigies were a dime a dozen, many who debuted as children didn't go to music college; in fact there were many cases where they only attended as adults, in order to get more of a background in music theory that would enrich their performance. Mieko herself had followed the latter pattern, coming first and second in two international competitions while in her teens – she was seen as a budding girl genius – and attending college later on.

But according to this CV, there was no evidence that Jim Kazama had ever performed anywhere. All it said was that at present he was special auditor at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse in Paris. *Special auditor, or 'listener'?* Was there really a such a thing?

Mieko racked her brain as she considered this. The boy had actually passed the written-application stage, and would be taking an audition at the Conservatoire. She found it hard to believe this was made up.

But when she glanced at the bottom of the document, in the column showing whom he'd studied under, she could understand why, despite this joke of a CV, he'd passed.

Her whole body turned suddenly hot.

It can't be true, she thought, shaking her head.

Right at the start she'd seen that bit of the CV, but must have deliberately pretended not to notice.

Has studied under Yuji Von Hoffmann since the age of five.

Her heart began to pound – she could feel the blood racing through her veins.

Mieko couldn't figure out why it had shaken her so much, and that shook her all the more.

That one simple sentence was so very important, and she could well understand why the dossier hadn't been rejected at the initial screening of written applications. Yet he had no performance experience at all, and wasn't at a music school. The boy was neither fish nor fowl, as far as she could see.

Mieko was dying to talk to the other two judges, but managed to suppress the urge. While she normally ignored any background information on the pianists, Simon was the type who always gave it a quick once-over, and Smirnoff made it a rule to glean as much information as possible, so they must have noticed this. To add to the surprise, there was a stamp on the application form indicating that a letter of recommendation was attached.

A letter of recommendation from Yuji Von Hoffmann! Her fellow judges must have been blown away by this.

Come to think of it, at dinner last night Simon seemed to be itching to tell them something. They had a self-imposed rule never to discuss the competitors. She could still picture his expression as he held back what he was clearly dying to say.

Simon had, at the time, spoken of Yuji Von Hoffmann, who had quietly passed away in February. His name was legendary – highly respected by musicians and music lovers around the world – but at his request he'd been given a private funeral with only close relatives in attendance.

But it didn't end there, for two months later, to mark his passing, international musicians held a huge memorial service. Mieko had a recital and wasn't able to attend, though she saw it all on video later on.

Hoffmann had not left a will. This was very like him, since he wasn't the type to become attached to anything, but at the memorial service the place was buzzing because of the final words Hoffmann was reported to have said to an acquaintance of his.

I set a bomb to go off.

A bomb? Mieko asked. Hoffmann was always seen as a mysterious figure, looming large in the world of music, but in reality he had quite an irreverent and mischievous streak. Even so, Mieko couldn't fathom what he'd meant by these words.

After I've gone, it will explode. A beautiful bomb for the world.

Hoffmann's relatives had asked him to clarify what he meant, but he had merely beamed and said nothing more.

Mieko stared impatiently at the almost blank documents.

Simon and Smirnoff must both have read Hoffmann's recommendation letter. What could he have written?

She was so worked up it took her a moment to notice the commotion.

She looked up and saw that the stage was empty. Staff members were moving around, tidying up.

So Jin Kazama wasn't going to turn up after all?

That had to be it – something was wrong with his dossier. And with the letter of recommendation. Just before he died, Hoffmann must have been quite weak. And it was in this debilitated state that he had written a letter.

A staff member in the wings called out:

'We just received a call from the next competitor that it is taking some time to get here and that he will be late. He will perform last today, and the other pianists will be moved up in order.'

The audience fell silent as the next pianist, a young girl in a red dress, made her way on to the stage, obviously discombobulated at the sudden change, her eyes panicky.

Gosh.

Mieko was disappointed. But at the same time, relieved.

Jin Kazama. What kind of performance would he give?

'HURRY UP!'

The boy had finally arrived at the audition office, where an official had torn his entrance ticket, and then he had rushed in towards the stage.

'I, um, would like to wash my hands.'