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**How Shall a Generation Know Its Story: The Edgar Bowers
Conference and Exhibition April 11, 2003**

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“Intelligence perfecting the mute keys: Edgar Bowers and Music”
by C. Kevin Smith

In the second poem of “Autumn Shade,” in a room that is home and no longer home, composed of objects that suggest companionship or solitude—books and pictures, a fireplace, a bottle of Bourbon—*Gently, / A dead soprano sings Mozart and Bach*. She is one of the poem’s shades, in between, the singer dead and the songs undying. This image of a woman’s recorded voice—both tangible object and untouchable sound, forever alive yet also locked in the past—contains something of music’s dual nature, its debt to both reason and emotion, abstract structure and human feeling. Music can embody perfect harmony and mortal imperfection, it marks the passage of time and is unmarked by it.

Great music—the compositions of Byrd and Handel, Bach, Haydn and Mozart—was an abiding source, subject, and model for the poetry of Edgar Bowers. From his earliest poems about Mozart to the cathedral bells and the luminous *compact disk whirl* of his late poem “John,” music plays throughout his poems, as abundant and elemental as nature or desire.

Not just any music, of course. In the poem “In Defense of Poetry,” the music of Shostokovich is asked to represent the cultural life of the unserious, the musical equivalent of television news, something loud and violent, a yuppie indulgence for the easily distracted, a kind of vicarious art of casual shock that would leave its listeners unchallenged and unchanged.

Perhaps Edgar is being unfair to the great Russian composer, whose music communicates a visceral sense of political oppression and personal despair.

But there is art that is descriptive, and art that is in some way morally prescriptive, art whose formal structures would elevate its subjects, fashioning a parallel—and therefore possible—world of rational thought. It was to this kind of art that Edgar Bowers would devote a lifetime of study and craft. Even when he acknowledged the *dissonances which have no resolution*, as in his poem “Numbers,” it would be within a context of formal logic and beauty.

He knew that such a standard existed; all he had to do was put on one of his many Mozart records. In Mozart, Edgar heard the possibility of balancing expressiveness and restraint. Humor and heartbreak, surging emotion and delicacy of design, none dominate but are in Mozart’s compositions precisely harmonized into a miraculous whole, across musical phrases that unfold with the inevitability of iambic pentameter, both taut and supple and moving in time. The 18th-century classical sonata-allegro form and its rational elements of theme and exposition, development, return and coda, offered a model for the kinds of poems Edgar aspired to write, and did write: poems that had flexibility yet also formal majesty, were elegantly graceful yet also solidly enduring.

A passion for music was one of the elements that deepened the friendship Edgar and I shared. I met him in the summer of 1989 at a dinner party with Dick Davis and Rob Wells and their families, after which we drove to the UCSB campus for a string quartet recital. If I remember correctly, the first half of the program featured Haydn and Mozart, the second half Ravel and Dutilleux, a contemporary French composer. On the way to the concert, Edgar said that, considering the program, there was no point in

staying after the intermission. “Nothing of any musical consequence was written after the death of Haydn,” he declared. But I was especially looking forward to the Dutilleux, a still-living composer I hadn’t even heard of. I asked Edgar, was he was always this cranky? My impertinence amused him considerably, and that moment of affectionate tension, between young and old, classical and modern, familiar and fresh—very fresh—laid the foundation for a friendship that continues, even now, to change and amaze me.

Of course, I never changed his taste, but he did help me broaden mine.

Not that he wasn’t game for almost anything. In New York, I once dragged him to Carnegie Hall, to hear a concert performance of the opera *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, which is perhaps as un-Mozartean as you can get. I was an impecunious graduate student at Princeton at the time, and so I bought us tickets for fifteen dollars each and we sat in the very last row of the very top balcony. Edgar listened attentively throughout the entire performance, which was superb: Hildegard Behrens singing the role of Marie, the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Christoph von Dohnanyi. I don’t really know what he made of the raw, spiky sounds of Berg’s music, but what he said to me when the performance was over was that he thought he should take a class in 20th-century composers, to try to understand what seemed to resist rational understanding.

There were many other occasions of shared musical pleasure. A performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in Washington, DC, whose production he praised especially for the opera’s penultimate scene, when Don Juan gets sucked into the flaming pit of hell, not in suffering torment as the scene is often presented, but with an expression of defiance that made stoicism look sexy; on Broadway, the all-male presentation of the Tchaikovsky ballet *Swan Lake*, one of the few times I saw Edgar truly weep; and driving

to Point Reyes together one winter morning with Bach's *B Minor Mass* on the car cassette player, the rising falling swells and fugal shapes of Bach's great work now forever associated in my mind with the green contours of that coastal landscape.

Music is art in time. With apologies to Thomas Hardy, one might say that music lures us on, enfolding us in a language of truth and beauty where no gap divides the thought from the feeling, the idea from its expression. In a sense, music would provide the form for the expressive content of our friendship, accompanying us on our first and our last days together and making for many of the highpoints on the days in between. Edgar listened to a lot of music during the weeks before he died, many compact disks awhirl with his beloved recordings, organ preludes by Bach, Haydn piano trios, Kathleen Ferrier singing "Where'er You Walk" from the Handel opera *Semele*: "Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade; Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade; Where'er you tread, the blushing flowers shall rise; And all things flourish where'er you turn your eyes."

To close, I would like to read one of Edgar's early Mozart poems. This one takes the form of an imagined letter of condolence from Haydn to Mozart's widow, Constanze. "Incredibly" is the first word of the poem, and indeed for Haydn, Mozart's untimely death was beyond that which could be believed. At first Haydn thought the news a baseless rumor; his own death had been reported to him many times. When he finally learned the truth, he was both furious and aggrieved. "I could not believe Providence had taken a man who was so irreplaceable," he wrote.

From J. Haydn to Constanze Mozart (1791)

Incredibly near the vital edge of tears,

I write, Constanze, having heard our loss.
Only the shape of memory adheres
To the most nearly perfect human pose
I hope to find, though mind and heart grow fierce,
Five times again as fierce as his repose.

The mind of most of us is trivial;
The heart is moved too quickly and too much.
He thought each movement that was animal,
And senses were the mind's continual search
To find the perfect note, emotional
And mental, each the other one's reproach.

With him as master, grief should be serene,
Death its own joy, and joy opposed by death,
What is made living by what should have been,
And understanding constant in its wrath
Within one life to fix them both the same,
Though no one can, unless it be in death.

Yet we who loved him have that right to mourn.
Let this be mine, that fastened on my eyes
I carry one small memory of his form
Aslant at his clavier, with careful ease,
To bring one last enigma to the norm,
Intelligence perfecting the mute keys.