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Diabolus in musica by Yann Apperry (Prix Medicis)
translated by Sarah Lane

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I don't know how many minutes I watched Lazarus Jesurum in the large parlour with its red fabric lampshades, fingers pressed to the ivory keys, not daring to separate my hands from the keyboard, so much did I dread the ecstasy about to seize me, the revelation of imminent apotheosis and of my deliverance. I stayed at the piano, the metronome's pendulum still swinging, and blood flowed. Two trickles welling out from under the hem of the nostrils to widen at the corners of the lips, streaming down the length of his throat into his shirt collar, down either half of his Adam's apple.

The metronome continued to beat the measure. Time had swayed under the arm of the pendulum that ticked into the emptiness, *tempo rubato*, its point aiming by turns at our silhouettes frozen in the parlour, taking leave of one to incline towards the other. I knew I was protected from its uniform cadence that overseered the silence and suppressed it all together just as long as the black blood poured, just as long as it blended with sweat and seeped into the fabric of his clothes, soaking his shirt, his crotch, down until it gorged the insides of his shoes.

Lazarus smiled. He had slid one of his hands into his pocket, no doubt in search of his handkerchief, a silk square embroidered with his initials. But never again would that hand lift to his face, no longer unwrap the frosted paper from his nougat candies, never again slide over the lines of a score, attentive to wrong notes as to errors in expression, no longer hammer at the piano, no longer chase a tear from his eye. The hand was curled up at the bottom of his pocket in the same way dying beasts withdraw and the other, hung.

I had performed the first version of my ballade, a simple exercise for piano and the mechanical metronome, whose orchestral transcription didn't yet exist except as a dream in those privileged moments at dawn. Chimes tolled once from the far end of the vast apartment. I remembered the response I gave Lazarus on the Villa-Ada heights on the occasion of a walk, of a rain shower, of a stop under the branches of a willow tree, of an embarrassed request. I remember telling him that of all deaths drowning seemed the least bother to me, the most consistent with the nature of humans, inasmuch as they founder, already, in the tsunami of their watered-down ideas, of their fleeting feelings. On the diatonic scale of possible deaths, I said to Lazarus, I opt for the one that emerges out of shipwreck. If I have the liberty, my time come, I'll strike this cord in A minor, augmented ninth and diminished thirteenth. I don't imagine I'll feel much as I go under, nothing very new. An effusion of varied and vain thoughts, a relentless surge in tempo, a sixteenth rest, a blinding obscurity, and the eternal double bar, hastily sketched, because I will refuse up until the end, I told him, to die uncompleted.

I would have liked to know the exact second. Was it on a passing note? On a muted note? On an accent? On some dissonance? Was it on a rest note? I would have given everything to know, forgetting in my agitation that sitting next to Lazarus, I possessed nothing. What did I have in exchange money, if not the sheets of music paper I took out of my bag, an ancient country doctor's case, if not my metronome, a Paquard 1918, if not the recital I had only scarcely just completed?

I could have, according to an unchanging tradition, sought out Lazarus at the twelve strokes of midnight, sat down at the piano, sipped on a coffee perfumed with orgeat, nibbled a nougat, listened to him carry on to me about systems of medieval notation, the style reserved for the ophicleide in such and such concerto, a bassoon solo in some other, explaining back to him in echo—*punctus contra punctum*, he would slip randomly into the conversation—the first bars of one of William Thomas Strayhorn's themes, and seen him shut his eyes in contrived spite; *Poor little sweet pea*, Duke Ellington wrote at his death, his lifelong companion, *God bless Billy Strayhorn, the biggest human being who ever lived*.

Blessed be Lazarus Jesurum and his ridiculous name. Blessed be the blood that bubbles right now from his ears. Blessed the meticulous affectation of his gabble and garb. Blessed his aversion for handshakes and signs of affection, bonds of attachment, invitations, leading ladies, bracket-seats, lyrical female singers, dreams, psychoanalysts' offices (in truth, all offices where one doesn't go alone), diaries, paper hankies, dog-eared corners in books, doors left ajar, blocked-up windows. Blessed the smile he offers me in the nick of time. Blessed be the name of Lazarus Jesurum, I murmured, overcome by irrepressible happiness, the feeling of power henceforth without limit, and I added, in the half-light of the parlour, between the Venetian mirror that reflected the starless night and the starless night that reflected on nothing: "Rise up and walk."

We rested there alone, my metronome and I, he whose life hadn't been but a preamble, a man who'd achieved his ends, and the instrument of his crime.

About the Author

Yann Apperry is a young French novelist, opera librettist, and playwright, born in 1972. In 2000, he won the Prix Médicis (a prize given to a young author's work for a new tone and style) for his novel *Diabolus in Musica*. He has also been a writer-in-residence at the Villa Médicis in Rome. In 2003, he won the Prix Goncourt des lycéens for his novel *Farrago*.

About the Translator

Sarah Lane, born 1976, is a second-year M.A. student in the Comparative Literature program at the University of British Columbia. Her academic interest is in contemporary fiction written by immigrants to Canada. Her creative interests include poetry, fiction and literary translation.

Translator's Note

I first came across Yann Apperry's novel in a used bookstore on Commercial Drive. The title *Diabolus in Musica* intrigued me, so I bought it. When I later began to study translation with George McWhirter, I chose to translate this novel. I knew the text was difficult, but I felt up to the challenge. Its long sentences and musical puns have at times proved even more difficult to translate than I had imagined, but I hope I have been able to capture its richness and musicality. In an online interview, Apperry explains that he wanted "to write the story of a character whose ear would be as sensitive as the hero's sense of smell in [Patrick Suskind's] 'Perfume.'" He has obviously succeeded; his prose flows like music on the page. I hope this English version of his first chapter successfully translates the elegance of his text.