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Sustained

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Author Bio

Drew Ciminera is a Senior and a Music and English double major at Gettysburg College. He is a practicing Theravada Buddhist and has an interest in wild and free-wheeling prose and poetry. He has been a resident of Richboro, PA for most of his life. This is his first literary submission.

Sustained

Drew Ciminera

It's not uncommon for a classical guitarist to study cello suites. In fact, transcribing cello suites has become a trend lately—many guitarists find themselves confronting Bach's six as accepted, if not required, repertoire. It's strange, though: the cello has such a wide berth of technical manipulations, while the guitar, though not devoid of its own particulars, is incapable of some of the cello's crucial abilities. Mischa Maisky can linger on a note for as long as he pleases. Better yet, he can make that note swell; he can crescendo and resonate in waves that push you to a rare and beautiful place, the point where the intellectual and visceral seemingly meet in a pure, unadulterated high. The guitar has its own gems, but it cannot do anything like Mischa's cello. You play a note on the guitar, loudly or softly, and it immediately decays.

I studied the suites once. When I was learning them, I wanted to recreate their charm in a way that was my own, in a way that could both entice and move the listener. So, in a lesson with my teacher, Dr. Hontz, I confronted a more conventional interpretation with one strange and rubato-filled performance.

"This sequence at m. 8: you're being far too flimsy with the time," he said. "That's not in the style—you're too Romantic. You need to play it more... direct."

I challenged him:

"I mean, that's how a lot of great cellists play it, right? Shouldn't we strive to imitate that as much as possible?"

He cocked his eyebrow behind his horn-rimmed glasses and then proceeded to show me a series of videos of guitarists who play it straight. He was right. So, I back-pedaled; though I adored the works, I questioned why we studied the suites at all—surely, they were more fit for the cello. Eventually, he gave me his somewhat paternal yet, more prominently, condescending half-smile:

"Drew, man, *yeah* a guitar is a lot different than a cello—but we did not choose the cello, we chose the guitar. *You* chose the guitar."

He was right and, with the thousands of times I've heard and re-heard that phrase and the thousands more who have heard and reheard it from him, I'm sure he will *always* be right: I had chosen the guitar.

In 2010, I spent a summer in Otis, Maine among relatives. My Aunt Lynn and Uncle Mark own a very old, somewhat dilapidated camp (it's a cabin, but they call it "camp") that my uncle inherited from his father. A few feet in front of camp, there was a dock that went into Beech Hill Pond—it's more like a lake, but it is only three square miles instead of some arbitrary number that some person in some place decided was the threshold to qualify for lake-hood. After an afternoon of swimming, I met my aunt and uncle for lunch on the porch. We ate sandwiches and shared a bag of chips as we looked out on the pond. I'm not sure how it happened, but, sometime between a few greasy chip bites and remarks about red squirrels, a topic surrounding my mother and my living situation with my brother came up. I remember my aunt reaching out her hand and touching mine:

"Honey, you know that we love you and are always here for you. I don't know why your mother planned things the way she did... but, had things been different, you'd be living with us and we'd be taking care of you."

My uncle nodded and my aunt smiled.

My aunt had and has a smile that, if you know it well enough, seems somewhat plastic. The smile wants to be sincere and maternal, but it always rubs you the wrong way. It's like a strange compliment to a statement that seems kind but has a speck of spite behind it. She loved my mother, her sister—but my mother wanted my brother to be my guardian, and I don't think Lynn liked that.

That same week, we caught and fried fish. I don't know why, but that day, I couldn't really stand anyone. I isolated myself and ignored most people around me—nothing too offensive from a grungy kid, but nothing terribly positive either. Towards the end of the evening, as Lynn and I washed dishes in the little nook of a kitchen, she looked at me and sighed:

"Drew, what the *hell* is up!? What's with the attitude?"

I furrowed my brow. "Wha-, I... it's been a rough day."

It had been more of a rough week, but she wasn't having it.

"You do realize that you've been acting like an ass for a while now, right!?"

"Well, I... I'm sorry. It's been hard."

I suppose "fuck you" might have been what I really wanted to say, but I just stammered.

It didn't matter, though—she was going to let it *all* out now. No plastic could hold these smile-worn lips.

"It's been hard for *you*? Yeah, well, it's been hard for me *too*! She was my sister!"

Sister—now, of all the words she said, that's one that meant something. Red hats shared from five to fifty; summer suns gushed and mar-

garitas tapped; journeys taken without a reason a la “Thelma and Louise”; churches and children shared with every Sunday morning; wry-smiled and petty reminders of a petulant four-year-old meeting her infant sister and remarking, “Take her back—she’s broken!” Yup—they were sisters.

“There are some nights when I just lay down and cry! When do *you* cry!? The way you and your brothers grieve... it’s wrong! It’s not human!”

She had stopped looking at me. She gave her full attention to the suds and the pan. My mouth was agape for a moment, and then it was closed. I walked away. I don’t think I cried, though.

My mother died on February 19th, 2009. I was fifteen. Before that day, she had spent a week with nurses and family at the support of in-home hospice. My mother’s siblings, all five of them, came up with their children and their children’s children. It wouldn’t come as a surprise to know that the time passed was more than uncomfortable; everyone was clammy and apprehensive, trying to keep busy when, honestly, there wasn’t much to do. People would talk, reminisce, sleep, play, or try to fix something—find a habit, rinse and repeat. No one wanted to walk or linger too close to where she lay, but—no matter what—everyone managed to enter the living room. There was always a person in the room watching her, but someone else would, at some point, walk in, and then, after a few minutes, would walk out. Afterwards, the house, as busy as it was, would have a soft, sometimes choked sob in the foreground.

My aunt came up to me at some point during this waiting period. I was practicing the second solo from Eric Clapton’s “Crossroads,” and rather poorly at that. She approached me as delicately as she possibly could:

“Hey, sweetie.”

I looked up at her and gave the most well-intentioned, half-hearted smile that I could muster: “Hi, Aunt Lynn.”

“How are you today?”

“I’m okay, I think.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s pretty good in light of things!”

We were both quiet. She sat down on a couch, paused, breathed in and out, and then smiled with an absurd giggle: “So, whatch ya’ playin’?!”

“Oh—nothing. I’m just fooling around with a solo.”

“Oh? Can I hear?”

I brandished a lick or two.

Her smile widened and her voice heightened, as if I were three and I finally put the cube in the square hole: “Oh, man—that sounds great! Look at you!”

I smiled a little bit and looked down at my guitar: “It needs some work, but thank you.”

"No, really, Drew—you're so good! Are you practicing that for a reason?"

"Yeah— I'm playing it in a show with my friends."

"Well, look at that! You're becoming a rock star, you!"

I probably chuckled and mumbled some quiet, I-don't-know-how-to-not-be-awkward thanks.

She paused for a moment again.

"Hey... maybe you could play something for your mom! I think she'd love it."

I went a little pale. I didn't know anything that did not require an amp and some ridiculous distortion. It would be a few more years before I met Dr. Hontz.

"No," I said bashfully. "I don't think I really know anything that she might like."

My aunt nodded and her smile faded a little bit.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

She paused for a split-second more.

"Okay! That's fine, honey."

She stood up from the couch,

"Well, keep on keepin' on. I'm going to go talk to your brother. If you need anything, you know I'll be around."

She gave a reassuring gesture, and walked away.

I eventually went into the living room and sat next to the bed. The only people in the room were my mother and an aunt and uncle from Tennessee. My mother lay there naked underneath loose hospital linens; her blue eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. I grabbed her yellowed hand and brushed my thumb against her drying skin. She grasped, turned to me, and almost involuntarily licked her dried, tired, and muted lips. It's strange to say, but, if some Victorian (say, Charles Dickens) were writing, he probably would have crafted a lengthy paragraph aiming to present a mournful, mythologized, Christian comparison for my mother, as if she were some graceful and ever-beautiful angel from death-bed to Heaven. She was not an angel—she was a swollen woman, an extremely exhausted and aged "cherub." She suffered a tumor in her brain and an arthritic body. Before, she suffered my father who, from his middle-age, suffered the deterioration of his own body and mind; she suffered the pressure of four boys with no father; she suffered through the loss of parents, friends, and ancient lovers; and, most of all, I think she suffered from her own seclusion. I wonder if, at the end of her long days, she looked away from her crime novel and stared at her swollen hands for too long; I wonder if she looked from her second-story window and thought about the distance between it and the first.

Imagining it all now, I wouldn't have blamed her. I definitely wouldn't.

When I spoke, I didn't have much to say, mostly because I didn't know *what* to say. I tried to wheedle some sentimental garbage from my mouth; I tried to mention a moment in which we looked at the stars together on Beech Hill Pond. If I recall, she, reasonably dissatisfied with what I'm sure was pretty shitty behavior, called me an ungrateful brat moments before our star-gazing. The best of times, I'm sure. Anyway, I don't think she heard much of what I said—I mumbled through my entire recollection. And she, of all people on this earth, was tired. She eventually loosened her grasp, groaned, and turned away.

Two months earlier, a home-phone rang quietly in the night. I awoke in a hot-sweat, though not to anything like I used to—usually, I'd wake up at this hour to the vixen scream of the red-coated banshees in the backyard who, fortunately, could never catch my unfortunately tracked, chased, and—above all—distraught cats. This wasn't that night, though. I walked downstairs and into the kitchen where the door to our backyard revealed a December storm. Mingled clots of snow fell in heavy mounds; a few cilia-tipped tufts of grass pierced the powdered surface before they were submerged and removed from the frostbitten scene. I looked to my left where the digital clock above the stove read “2:17” and then forward and down where the pale green light on the phone illuminated the dark and shook on the table with each quiet though unnerving buzz. I picked up the phone:

“Hello?”

The calm voice of my soon-to-be sister-in-law answered: “Hey. Drew? Is this Drew?”

I nodded my head to the ghost in the room: “Yes... who is this?”

“It's Lorie.”

“Who?”

“It's Lorie.”

My breath slowed down as I scrunched my face with my left hand:

“Oh—sorry. Hey, Lorie... what's up?”

“Hey! So, I'm sorry to wake you up and rush into this—but it is really important. Nick thinks you guys should come to the hospital.”

I removed my hand from my face. My pulse was becoming more apparent to me.

“I'm not trying to make you panicked—but we don't know what's up. Nothing is happening immediately, all of your mother's signs are fine... but Nick think you guys need to come down tonight.”

Again, another gesture to the ghost: “Okay.”

“Get your brothers up and leave as soon as you can. Your aunt and uncle will probably meet you guys here—I know the weather is hell.”

“Uh... okay.”

“Okay? Please call us when you guys are on your way.”

“Yeah. Yeah—will do.”

“See ya’ soon.”

“Bye.”

I went upstairs and woke both my brothers. We all prepared to go outside and shovel the driveway when my Aunt Lynn and Uncle Mark appeared in a teal van with four-wheel drive. They had been on their way over when Lorie had called. We all huddled silently in their van and drove up interstate-95 as fast as the snowstorm would let us.

When we reached my mother’s room, my brother Nick was sitting on an elongated and padded window-sill, looking out and away where the snow burdened the city. Lorie stood closer to my mother’s bed and looked down on my mother with sympathetic eyes as she, distraught, prostrate, and helpless, breathed in short and agonizing bursts. My brother and his fiancée rose when we entered. We arrived moments before the hospital staff moved my mother to a different floor.

She lay there sobbing between broken phrases:

“I... it’s... I know it’s...”

We lived on a hill, my family and I—we had seen flood after flood, leaf after sunken leaf beneath the flowing essence of some numinous eye and its sustaining prerogative for sorrow. I had only seen my mother cry three times—this was the third time. My brother and aunt looked at her. We were all looking at her—but my aunt and brother gazed with a greater anticipated grief than anyone there. Her first-born and her sister were the only people who spoke to her with any level of intimacy; they were her confidantes, the ones who knew all of her secrets. It was no secret, though: any nurse, doctor, or experienced human being could tell you that death’s approach is most easily foreseen by the person dying.

We huddled around her now. My mother sucked on a small wet sponge that was held by a plastic stick and re-moistened by water in a small white Dixie cup. My aunt would hold the stick and press it to her tongue, but the process was short-lived. My mother’s tears were dried, but her face wrenched with fear, despair, and final urgency. She had no more of the sponge; she needed to find a way to speak. My aunt stood by as my mother’s translator, the only one who could feasibly interpret each struggled syllable. She was giving out marching orders to each one of my brothers. When she came to me, the meaning was nearly impossible to find. “Go to Abbey Road,” was my aunt’s final translation. I was going to London that spring with the choir—and that’s the only time I planned on being there in my life. We all looked to my mother; she had said her piece and had calmed. Like good sons or soldiers should, we accepted our orders.

When the moment came, I, along with all of my brothers, stood at the foot of the bed. My aunt motioned for me to stand by my mother's head, but my oldest brother, an RN, was already there with a stethoscope in-hand. He pressed the cold head of the instrument against the top of her naked breast to feel a tenuous beat. Her face was pale; her mouth was open and sagged; her tongue was loose and her eyes were settled. My brother pulled the stethoscope away and bowed his head:

"I'm sorry, everyone."

An old man could have been coughing and swearing while he weed-whacked outside the window; all the ugly-faced, Napoleon-complexed lap dogs could have released their hell-born yelps at once; a whole fucking parade could have taken a short hour detour through our cramped living room—it didn't matter. The silence was unbroken for what felt like minutes. And then Nick sniffled. After that, you could have invited the old man, the lap dogs, and the parade to join our choir.

In 1723, it's assumed that Bach began to write his cello suites. His compositions came at a tumultuous time for the cello, at a point when strings, cello bodies, techniques, and tunings were becoming standardized. The cello was rich with warmth and resonant potential; its new design gave room for an experimental and particularly expressive approach. Four years after my mother's death, I went to her grave while the ground was covered in frozen snow and I played the prelude to the second suite. It's the only suite in minor, and its prelude is rife with something that I can hardly describe. It begins with a slow and melancholic arpeggiation of a d minor chord (the key of the piece), and then a panged diminished arpeggio that builds once and then again to a new loud and tortured height. After you can take no more, it recedes into the dim-lit and quiet sorrow of the original chord. The whole piece washes you as it moves in and out of keys, minor and major, humor after humor in a seemingly unending wave of melody. The final cadence is a struggle: it pushes until it bursts in one final and lamentful yielding of the d minor chord. I don't think Bach imagined his work being touched by a guitarist, contemporary or not: no, a guitar cannot sustain—no, they can only decay. But despite the frosted headstones and the fields that couldn't lift a note, I chose the guitar, and I played what my numb fingers could.