

## The Woman Who Listened to Britten

*by Con Chapman*

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THE MUSIC, it seemed to him, had infused her personality, the way garlic or an onion is absorbed into the blood and isn't just carried on the breath. She was—tentative, nervous, vague, like the sounds coming out of the stereo.

“Can we put something else on?” he asked. It was Sunday afternoon, mid-winter. There was some sun coming in through the windows that faced north, towards the alley, but it would disappear before too long. He didn't want to end the weekend in an edgy mood from listening to too much Britten.

“It's almost done,” she said. They were sitting in the big open room, the living room, the one with the wide plank floorboards. It was this touch that had sold her on the apartment since it resembled those in the house that her friend Jackie lived in, north of Boston, up in Newburyport. Jackie's husband Eric had money, his family owned a chain of stores. He could afford to buy a house right out of college; they couldn't, and besides he needed to be downtown in order to spend long hours at work. Eric worked at the public radio station because he didn't have to.

The music flowed on, dissonant, unnerving; there was an unspoken sadness to it, much like her personality. She sat there, unruffled, as if it

were plainsong emanating from the nave of a church within her. It made him restless.

“I’m going for a run,” he said finally, when he felt he couldn’t stand to listen anymore.

“What are we going to do about dinner?” she asked.

“I’ll stop at DeLuca’s on the way home,” he said.

He changed out of his clothes and into sweats, then headed towards the door without saying anything.

“Turn out the light when you go,” she said.

“Why?” he asked, more sharply than he should have, he supposed, but he was irritated.

“I want to listen in the dark.”

He did as she asked, turned the lock, then walked out without locking it since she was still there.

He headed slowly down Beacon Street, on the brick sidewalks where he risked turning his ankles, all because the preservationists wanted the neighborhood to look the way it did two hundred years ago. Once he got to Charles Street he would be on pavement the rest of the way, and he increased his pace.

He wound around the circular bridge named after Arthur Fiedler, over to the Esplanade, and as he wound his way up, then down again, he thought about their last exchange.

It was just like her, he thought, to listen to music with the lights out. It wasn't enough to just have it on in the background, she had to feel it deeply, even if it didn't show on the surface; still waters and all that.

As he rounded the last curve of the footbridge and headed west the sun was beginning to set over the Mass. Ave. bridge; there was a sort of pink trim above the cars crossing back and forth, then some light blue, then already a deeper blue above that, pressing lower by the minute. It would be fully dark back in the apartment, and she would be deep into her gloom, swirling downward.

He could imagine what kind of mood she'd be in when he got back; distant, other-worldly. She reserved the right, she had once told him, to be depressed all winter if she felt like it; he'd courted her in the spring, and she hadn't moved in with him until it was too late, two weeks into September. They'd spent a rough first year together, and were now facing their second year together, in a bigger apartment than they could afford at first, but now winter, as the poem he recalled from college said, was i-cumin in.

What kind of person, he asked himself as he had before, made a claim on a season that way? Winter applied to everyone, no one was exempt; everybody else dealt with it, why couldn't she?

He'd been thinking of moving out for several weeks, or telling her it was over. She had a friend on the back side of the Hill she could move in with, it would be better for both of them, he rationalized. Except—except that the back side of the Hill was even darker than their current place; you didn't get any sun unless you were high up, and her friend's place was down a little alley. She'd get less sun there, and end up being less happy than she was now. He couldn't do it to her.

He reached Mass. Ave. and hurdled up the steps to the bridge, two at a time. He slowed down for an old woman making her way up when a young couple blocked his way around her coming down, then was off again.

The bridge was clear so he used the space ahead without obstruction to turn to his left and catch the last of the dying light. He could live alone, he'd done it for three months while he waited for her to make up her mind about moving to Boston. He didn't need roommates at this point in his life—he was twenty-five years old, he figured the whole

notion of coming back to your place and hanging out with roommates was behind him.

Plus she'd be better off with her friend, Sheila. They worked together, they liked to drink together; they were always laughing when he came home and Sheila was there. So she could tough it out a couple more months, then find another place, closer to B.U., maybe in Brookline where there was more light and space.

He reached the Cambridge side and began to think about the Britten opera she'd dragged him to, *Billy Budd*. It must have been three hours long, and all he could remember was one snatch of song—"This is our moment, we've been waiting for." He'd fallen asleep at the end of the first act; it had been another Sunday evening, the work week hanging over him, a big document to read, but she—she still had the energy to go to the Metropolitan Opera. Her job wasn't taxing; she worked for a Dean at B.U., and rarely had to work past five.

So she'd do okay, he thought. She'd hook back up with her college friends, who she really preferred to him, he had to admit. They had time, or they had money so they had time, to be more precise. If he had a trust fund or his parents had a vacation house he could have spent more time with her, but he didn't and she knew it when she accepted his invitation

to move in with him. Now that she found out what his earnest young life was like, she decided he was a drudge. Well, it sort of came with the territory; what did she want him to do, crap out after all those years of school and end up living in a basement apartment in Brighton?

No, he gave her what she'd said she wanted, right from the start; a place on Beacon Hill, overlooking the Common, even if it was on the ground floor. Then they got a bigger apartment and he thought she'd be happier, but they realized as the first month of the lease passed and it got into October that it would be darker than the other one was. It was the long darkness of the season, he had come to understand, that set off her moods.

He reached the Longfellow Bridge, with its salt and pepper shaker towers. When he ran with friends they would begin to accelerate from this point to home, but he slowed up. He didn't want to get back, not so soon, not until the music was over. She'd be in a state of rapture, her eyes closed. He'd have to tiptoe around to take a shower, then she'd be so out of it it would take a while for her to come back from whatever place she went to when she was transported by music.

He made his way up the hill and realized, just as he stuck the key in the lock, that he'd forgotten to get dinner and so went back down to the

market. The pickings were slim, and it was closing time. The little beetle-browed man-of-all-work was making his way around, calling “Shoppers—for your convenience we will be closing in five minutes.” When you had a monopoly, he thought, as this place did, you could abuse your customers like that.

He got two pork chops and squash and beans; he figured he could put the chops in the oven and they’d be done in forty-five minutes, long enough for him to shower and get dressed. By then she’d have come back to earth, he thought.

He climbed back up the hill and opened the outer door, then tried the key in the apartment door. The security bar was up, and the dead bolt was locked as well. He started to knock, then thought she might be sleeping, and so he took his keys out and opened the door quietly.

The lights were still off but the music had stopped. He heard the clicking of the needle at the end of the record, and then a whimpering, over against the outer wall.

“Martha?” he asked.

The human sound turned to a sob. “I’m over here,” she said, then began to cry out loud.

He turned on a light and saw that she was cowering in the corner.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“What took you so long?”

“I got dinner like I said I would—why?”

“A man . . . came to the back door. And shined a flashlight in the window. I could see him against the streetlights. I screamed.”

“Did he get in?”

“No—he ran away when he heard me, but nobody came. I ran and bolted the door—you left it unlocked.”

“You were awake when I left. I figured . . .”

“Well, you should have. I’ve been sitting here—where he couldn’t see me--waiting for you the whole time.”

He sat down beside her and put his arm around her, trying to keep her from shaking. He figured now they’d have to stay together, at least until the end of the lease.



**Con Chapman** is a Boston (USA) based-writer, author of two novels. His short fiction has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* and other print publications. He is currently writing a biography of Johnny Hodges, Duke Ellington’s long-time alto sax player, for Oxford University Press.