

Piano Miniatures: An Essay on Brevity

1.

On 16 January 1927, Czech composer Leoš Janáček wrote a twenty-five-bar score called “Malostranský palác” or “Little-Sided Palace.” The piece evokes a specific place, the artsy section of Prague around Malostranský square and castle. Janáček gives a toylike rendering of the palace: short, delicate, animated, pianissimo. Repeated sixteenth notes fall from a soprano E-flat, to an alto B-flat, to a tenor D-flat, and, finally, to a bass D-flat. A rhythmic figure binds the miniature together. In the second half of the score, the quarter notes get lopped off, leaving an abbreviated variant on the initial motif. However minuscule this alteration, it never interrupts the downward momentum of the music, which does not elaborate a narrative so much as peter out after a sequence of repetitions. Lasting 45 seconds, this piece meditates on shortness as an aesthetic property.

Janáček wrote short pieces throughout his life, including the six-bar “Melody,” published in 1923, five years before his death. Many of these short works have the spontaneity of diary entries. They respond to immediate events, such as the lovely “Christ Is Born,” dated Christmas Eve, 1909. Fugitive pieces by Janáček were assembled and published posthumously in 1994 as *Piano Miniatures: Intimate Sketches*. A second volume of nineteen miniatures, based on Janáček’s ethnomusicological interests, was compiled in 1995 under the title *Piano Miniatures: Moravian Dances*. Although Janáček himself did not call these works “miniatures,” all the pieces are very brief. They were composed as quick studies, acoustic portraits, sudden bursts of inspiration, and melodies complete in themselves. They alternate between reverie and interruption. Like some love affairs these miniatures enchant because they end quickly.

2.

Piano miniatures defy the impulse to enlarge. They flare up in a flash. They do not work the germ of an idea into a long and cogent argument. Writing about Chopin’s transformations of the Polish mazurka into longer works such as the ballad, Charles Rosen points out that Chopin “generally preserves intact within a larger context the original small form, the banal structure of dance and trio, each

made up of two, three, or four phrases of eight bars.” A flighty counterpart to the symphony or sonata, the miniature evolves from a mood, a whim, a rhythm, a sonority, a particular acoustic detail. Miniatures in music resemble aphorisms in language. They state principles without providing examples. Meaning shimmers around them. They can be curt to the point of brusqueness.

By virtue of their dainty dimensions, piano miniatures seem static, over-refined. Little things are thought to be more subtle than monumental ones. Like dollhouses or tiny train sets, miniatures for the piano invite flights of fantasy into worlds where time and its consequences do not intrude. Inside the miniature a different order of time reigns, one that approaches immobility. Because they possess their own temporal order of daydream or imagination, piano miniatures are neither epic nor tragic. They do not have the sense of narrative that Chopin’s ballades or Schumann’s piano cycles possess. Miniatures are simply not long enough. They abide by their own time standard.

The piano miniature presupposes near inaudibility. The miniature raises to acoustic significance material that might otherwise have escaped notice. Eric Tanguy’s third miniature in *Sept Miniatures* resembles, in its dying fall, though not in its harmonic vocabulary, the opening of the adagio Intermezzo from Brahms’s op. 119. Schoenberg’s soundscapes in *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke*, op. 19, also depend on Brahms’s late piano pieces for inspiration, insofar as they show structural rigor. For the most part Schoenberg’s little pieces end within 60 seconds, some in even less time. In their brevity they remain inexplicable, as shocking as a scream or as intimate as a whisper. In Schoenberg’s short pieces no elaboration clarifies principal from subordinate themes.

3.

While shopping for sheet music one day, I came across Theodor F. Kirchner’s *Miniatures*, op. 62. Kirchner wrote about one thousand works, most of them for piano. He also arranged symphonic and ensemble music for solo piano, including Brahms’s *Ein Deutsches Requiem*.

A disciple of Schumann, Kirchner courted Clara Schumann after Robert’s death. Brahms, who remained Clara’s blue-eyed boy, apparently never knew about this intimacy. As an expression of reciprocated interest, Clara sent Kirchner a lock of Robert’s hair, a gift akin to a relic of the True Cross for nineteenth-century composers. When Clara realized in 1861 that her suitor did not have the makings of a first-rank composer, she threw him over. Two decades later she wrote in her journal, “Today I succeeded in making myself read through the old

letters from Kirchner. . . . If only I could wipe this old friendship entirely out of my life! for I gave my heart’s best to a man whom I hoped it might save. . . . I wished to make one so highly gifted into a worthy man and artist.”

Kirchner suffered from depression, which may be what Clara wanted to save him from. In any event she hoped to make him worthy of her by giving her “heart’s best.” She positions herself as both the recipient and donor of affection—a sadistic pretense of generosity if ever there was one. No wonder Kirchner failed to measure up. To remedy her disappointment Clara wished for his complete disappearance. To his immense credit Kirchner married someone else.

Kirchner’s miniatures imitate Robert Schumann’s piano music. His admiration for Schumann ran deep. For instance Kirchner penned *Neue Kinderszenen*, op. 55, as a homage to Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, op. 15. Especially in his works for or about children, Schumann promotes romantic miniaturization; many of the pieces in his *Album for the Young* last no more than a minute or two. Kirchner simplifies the romantic keyboard techniques of Schumann’s music further by crystallizing melodic contours and harmonic structures. Kirchner’s ninth miniature from op. 62, for example, recalls Schumann’s “Fröhlicher Landmann, von der Arbeit zurückkehrend” from *Album for the Young*. Although the rhythmic configuration is similar, Schumann’s farmer sounds cheerful, whereas Kirchner’s miniature remains muted and unfulfilled by comparison. Kirchner obsesses over the right-hand chords and rests. Schumann takes these elements for granted, then varies them with a jovial tenor melody and an octave doubling of the principal theme. Kirchner’s miniature is not a failure; it merely does less with its manifest material.

Kirchner’s third miniature, in the key of C-minor to an allegretto tempo, has the same enthusiasm for steeplechase as does Schumann’s “Jagdlied” or “Hunting Song” in E-flat major from *Waldszenen*. Whereas Schumann elaborates his hunting idea through several modulations and counter themes, Kirchner restricts his miniature to a binary form, repeating his ideas without much variation. A good idea needs no elaboration, he appears to claim. The 6/8 time and darting, catch-the-bunny staccato notes belong to the hunting song genre. In effect Kirchner repackages Schumann.

The miniature, such as Kirchner writes it, is a sample of wares. It displays certain skills without excessive showiness. The miniatures flow in numbered sequence to indicate the plurality of the composer’s style, like a salesman’s kit filled with different moods. In his reconfigurations of Schumann, Kirchner offers an allegory of nineteenth-century talent. Here are the essentials. What more

needs to be said? For this reason Kirchner's restrained miniatures comment ironically on Schumann's fertility of imagination. Instead of being a musician who did not live up to the category of nineteenth-century genius, Kirchner was simply a musician who knew how to economize.

4.

Miniatures bespeak economy in art, not waste. Elizabeth Bishop once told Robert Lowell, "I'm not interested in big-scale work as such. Something needn't be large to be good." A big-scale work does not lack detail, but the significance of details depends on the scale of the work in which they appear. In this sense piano miniatures are often essays on the nature of musical detail. For example Karl Korte, in his witty *Three Miniatures*, presents comic ways of sliding out of tune and then back into tune. The harmonies in the second miniature in Korte's series, called "Song," fumble from key to key, like an accompanist hunting for chords. While the singer stands by her key (A-major, sort of), wayward harmonies divagate toward B-flat major. The harmonies fling dissonances at the melody. The accompaniment coaxes the melody, rather abruptly and unhappily, into a zone between D-flat major and B-flat minor. That doesn't work out, so the song slides, rather than modulates, back toward A again. I reckon that the galumphing left-hand rhythm and the get-along-little-dogie lonesomeness of the melody make this a cowboy song. Korte's miniature, to my mind, dwells on the idea of in-and-out-of-tuneness as a musical commonplace, one worth writing into the score.

By isolating details, small works defy categories of conventional beauty. Aristotle in *Poetics* claims that "beauty depends on magnitude and order." Sculptures on the head of a pin or a grain of rice do not have magnitude. Therefore, in Aristotle's view, such sculptures lack beauty. Similarly, the miniature for piano contests principles of repetition and duration that constitute grander and more discussed musical forms, such as the sonata, the rondo, the scherzo, and the ballad.

5.

Kirchner's and Korte's miniatures set me thinking about small-scale piano pieces. Chopin's *Preludes* sprang immediately to mind, as did Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. The former makes a virtue of filigree, but Chopin implies that his *Preludes* precede something unwritten and in this sense exist as romantic fragments. Moreover, they adhere to a rigid formal structure of key relationships, a circle of fifths yoked to their relative minors.

Mikrokosmos isolates specific physical challenges, such as playing in sevenths, or passing the thumb under the hand, or making divided arpeggios flow seamlessly. Still and all *Mikrokosmos* belongs to the category of studies designed to improve technique, as do multitudes of short scores dedicated specifically to children's needs, such as Dimitri Kabalevsky's *Four Little Pieces*, op. 14 (1949) or Andrzej Hundziak's *Circus: Piano Miniatures for Children* (1969), which I would otherwise be tempted to include as illustrations of the piano miniature.

So, I asked a couple of musicians and musicologists for suggestions of other miniatures. "What do you mean by *miniature*?" snorted one colleague with derision.

My definition is not, at first glance, complicated. A piano miniature bears in its title the word *miniature* and therefore announces the composer's will to brevity. A work that calls itself *miniature* asks listeners to think about duration, especially shortness.

The genre requires further definition. A piano miniature usually lasts between 30 and 120 seconds. Bartók includes duration for pieces in *Mikrokosmos*, as do many subsequent composers. Time acquires, therefore, a different scale and dimension than it does in, for instance, Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Although numerous miniatures exist for other instruments and even small ensembles, I excluded them in order to concentrate on piano repertory.

Miniatures are not necessarily written for children. Small pieces need not be played exclusively by small people. What child would pick up Ernst Krenek's *Twenty Miniatures*, written in the form of an introduction, theme, and variations, all astonishingly brief yet filled with urbanity and intellectual strife? Miniatures do not identify complexity with virtuosity or length. The miniature is not a form per se, but a genre characterized by the length of a composition. These criteria distinguish the miniature from other amorphous genres, such as the impromptu, the prelude, the intermezzo, or the song without words.

6.

Initially, I assumed that I would find cartloads of romantic miniatures. Rum-maging around I discovered instead a mother lode of mostly twentieth-century examples, many published after 1965:

T. F. Kirchner, *Miniatures*, op. 62 (1882)

Alexander Glazunov, *Drei Miniaturen*, op. 42 (1893)

Leo Ornstein, *Nine Miniatures*, op. 7 (1916)

Leopold Godowsky, *Miniatures for Piano Solo* (1918–26)
 Leoš Janáček, *Klavírini Miniatury: Sesit 1, Intimní Skici* (1994; written earlier)
 Leoš Janáček, *Klavírini Miniatury: Sesit 2, Maravské Tance* (1995; written earlier)
 Frank Bridge, *Miniatures and Miniature Pastorals* (three sets: 1917, 1921, 1977)
 Howard Hanson, *Three Miniatures* (1923)
 Geoffrey Watson, *Three Miniatures for Pianoforte* (1924)
 Joaquin Turina, *Miniaturas: 8 Petits [sic] Pièces pour Piano* (1930)
 Ernest Walker, *Four Miniatures for Piano*, op. 46 (1931)
 Leopold Walter Rovenger, *Classical Miniatures for Piano* (1941)
 Ernesto Lecuona, *Tres Miniaturas* (1943)
 Porter Quincy, *Six Miniatures for Piano* (1943)
 Dag Wirén, *Ironical Miniatures for Piano*, op. 19 (1942–45)
 Oscar Fernandez, *Two Miniatures* (1953)
 Ernst Krenek, *Twenty Miniatures* (1957)
 Violet Archer, *Three Miniatures for Piano* (1965)
 Allan Blank, *Six Miniatures and a Fantasia* (1967)
 Sofia Nikolaevna Chicherina, *Miniatures*, op. 21 (1967)
 Ernest Gold, *Drei Miniaturen für Klavier* (1968)
 Iudif Grigorevna Rozhavskaia, *Try miniatiury dlia fortepiano* (1969)
 Loris Tjeknavorian, *Nine Miniatures* (1976)
 Eric Gaudibert, *Quatre Miniatures* (1978)
 Ivanka Necic, *Zbirka Minijatura* (1979)
 Wilhelm Petersen, *Neun Miniaturen*, op. 52 (1979)
 Tamás János, *Eisblumen: 14 Miniaturen für Klavier* (1979)
 Karl Korte, *Three Miniatures* (1980)
 Antony Garlick, *Fifteen Miniatures* (1981)
 Georges Leduc, *Quatre Miniatures* (1982)
 Alexander Tansman, *Album d'amis: Neuf Miniatures pour Piano* (1982)
 Hans Werner Henze, *Cherubino: 3 Miniaturen für Klavier* (1983)
 Antony Garlick, *Eleven Miniature Portraits* (1987)
 Gerard Gastinel, *Miniature 2* (1988)
 Frederik von Rossum, *Twelve Miniatures*, op. 10 (1989)
 Arne Oldberg, *Three Miniatures*, op. 27 (1990)
 John Barton-Armstrong, *Curios: Six Fantasy Miniatures for Piano Solo*, op. 38 (1991)
 Libor Scerba, *Miniatury* (1993)
 Eric Tanguy, *Sept Miniatures* (1993)

Rupert Frieberger, *Vier Miniaturen 1994–1996* (1996)
 Simeon Stafford, *Twelve Miniatures*, op. 2 (1998)
 Simeon Stafford, *Twelve Miniatures*, op. 32 (1998)
 Ivan F. Karabyts, *Five Miniatures for Piano* (1998)
 Lorenz Schmidt, *Sechs Miniaturen für Klavier* (1999)
 Matt Turner, *Ten Miniatures for Piano* (1999)
 Andrei Popov, *Miniatures* (2000)

Sometimes *miniature* signifies a trifle, something disingenuously small that a composer has tossed off. Yet smallness need not be conflated with triviality. With a less literal application of *miniature* as a title, my list would include an addendum of piano pieces styled, self-consciously, as “little” or *klein*. Without advertising themselves as miniatures, these pieces fit squarely into the tradition of tiny-ness: Max Reger’s *Zehn Kleine Vortragsstücke*, op. 44 (1899); Arnold Schoenberg, *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke*, op. 19 (1911); Josef Matthias Hauer, *Sieben Kleine Stücke*, op. 3 (1925). Many composers working with twelve-tone writing or expressionist atonality find the miniature congenial to their purposes. Often, the miniature pushes emotion to extreme limits, whether the *fff* and *pppp* dynamics in Schoenberg’s op. 19, or the tamped-down hysteria in Reger’s and Hauer’s vocabulary.

The piano miniature travels. Cuban, Russian, Ukrainian, American, Canadian, British, Czech, German, Brazilian, Swedish, and Spanish composers try their hands at the genre. Miniatures cross-fertilize with other musical kinds. The miniature does not abide by any single identity or form except briefness. Glazunov’s miniatures drift toward conventionality: a pastoral, a polka, a waltz. Miniaturists pilfer. Frederik von Rossum includes a Pierrot in his suite; Ernesto Lecuona places *Polchinella* as the conclusion of three miniatures; Hans Werner Henze labels his miniatures *Cherubino*, after the cheeky servant in Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. In this way the miniature resuscitates the long tradition of *commedia dell’arte*, but only as a trace, a shortened version of the tiptoeing and stealth associated with *Pedrolino* and *Polchinella*. The miniature flags the dead-ends of classical music. Pierrot has no cultural currency outside of music traditions. To resuscitate Pierrot is to prove how close he is to death.

Notwithstanding their shortness miniatures defy standard ways of thinking about repertory. My quest for miniature compositions indicated how conventional my conception of piano music was, and how few contemporary composers I actually listened to. The miniature migrates into kitsch (Hanson), twelve-tone

(Hauer), Latin cha-cha (Fernandez), aw-shucks cowboyism (Korte), eeriness (Gaudibert), and other styles.

7.

When I played Howard Hanson's *Three Miniatures* for a friend, he declaimed, "That is just vulgar!" It is true. Hanson's score is filled with Liberace-like excess. Whether drawing upon aleatory, contrapuntal, dodecaphonic, or other traditions, the miniature flouts conventions of listening.

8.

As a teenager I had grandiose ambitions for a concert career. Five hours a night after school, I practiced scales, arpeggios, and chords, followed by Pischna, Hanon, Czerny, and Clementi exercises, then serious repertory. On weekends I logged up to eight hours at the keyboard per day. I amused myself by playing scales in seconds, ninths, and fourths. In 1980, after marathons of rehearsal, I was accepted with a scholarship into a relatively prestigious music program.

For a year I toiled over my ear training, choral singing, music history, and counterpoint. In a theory class the instructor asked us to close our eyes and listen minutely to all the sounds around us. At first I heard nothing. Gradually, footsteps in the hall came into audibility. A plane passing overhead. Distant shouts. The hum of fluorescent lights. The murmur of a professor in the adjacent classroom. The whoosh of a door. A range of sub-audible noises. Instead of emptiness the environment was awash in acoustic information. Listening to layers of sound—genuinely listening—proved the most memorable lesson I acquired at music school.

9.

The miniature gives a snapshot, sometimes of a person or a place. Janáček's "Své Olze" or "My Olga" is, in its entirety, ten bars long (twenty with repeats). A character sketch, "Své Olze" portrays a couth milkmaid in its opening four bars. The duple time is earthbound. The triplet floats easy as a whistle. In the E-minor section that follows, Olga grows more temperamental. Snarky, hammered sixteenth notes bespeak Olga's steely firmness. The final chord, short and decisive, has no fermata over it. Nor does this chord require pedaling. Whereas the arpeggiated chord at the end of bar four suggests whimsy, the arpeggiated chord that concludes the piece suggests dismissal. At first likeable, Olga reveals an obstinate streak when you get to know her.

Olga is straightforward. Olga is insistent. Olga is no more!

Peremptoriness makes the piece a droll commentary on Olga's transience, or the composer's passing interest in her.

10.

The piano miniature, as a genre, resembles the inertness of a thing. The miniature finds its equivalent in an object, not a story. Music substitutes for the object and takes on the qualities of thingness. Like a bijou in a case, the miniature announces its status as a collectible, an object for study. Nevertheless, the piano miniature is a disinherited genre within musicology. The *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the authoritative encyclopedia on matters sonic, offers no definition of the miniature, even though a multitude of composers have worked within the genre.

11.

Miniature objects—loquets, portraits, nano-sculptures—are designed to be portable, like a picture worn in a case around the neck or photographs of children carried in a wallet. Meaning compacts in a miniature object. The affection felt for the person represented in the miniature portrait is translated onto the representation itself, where meaning densifies. The miniature betokens what has shrunk out of view, what has been forgotten. The miniature for piano tries to recuperate forgotten time and sentiments but does not necessarily succeed. Janáček's "Old-Fashioned Dance," the sixth piece in the *Moravian Dances*, moves with the stateliness of a sarabande. The piece calls attention to its oldfangledness. No one dances sarabandes anymore. The miniature allows its listeners to recognize that some moods, sentiments, and dances have disappeared beyond a hope of recuperation. Time causes emotions and people to disappear. Grief and connections with others are forgotten. In the end even the act of forgetting is suppressed. Miniatures afford a glimpse into the process of disappearances, of how so much of what is felt becomes forgotten. The past shrinks into an interval of a minute, which is the approximate length of a piano miniature. Even with a substantial repeat, "Old-Fashioned Dance" lasts 90 seconds.

12.

In the fifteenth century Florentine and Venetian merchants carried on their persons cunningly wrought, minuscule books of hours, sometimes "measuring two square inches, set in gold, and worn suspended from the belt by a charm or

rings,” according to Susan Stewart in her book titled *On Longing*. The shrunken book attests to the prestige of the merchant—literature as accessory—not necessarily to the merchant’s access to literacy. The miniature may be perfect, but the smaller it becomes, the more grotesque it seems. Its uselessness becomes evident when it shrinks. Whereas craftsmanship and intricacy, details and microscopy stand out in a miniature, illusions of reality and unity, proportion and repetition stand out in larger works.

13.

For my first-year recital in university, I learned by rote Beethoven’s Sonata op. 109, the two nocturnes in op. 27 by Chopin, and “Reflète dans l’eau” from the first book of *Images* by Debussy. I knew my music cold.

Cold it turned out to be. On the day of my recital, I awoke in icy panic. My body felt deep-chilled, yet I couldn’t stop sweating, as if I were burning up with fever. Three times before I left my apartment, I changed my underwear, which was drenched with sweat. Near the recital hall I ran into Grace Kiely, my close friend and fellow pianist.

“Please, Grace, don’t sneak into the hall to listen to my performance. I’m really nervous. I’d rather you not lurk in the entry.” Grace nodded but didn’t commit.

Seven faculty members sat at the back of the darkened recital hall. Saturated with terror I sat down at the piano and started playing Beethoven. My fingers jerked from one bar to the next. I twitched like an automaton programmed for virtuosity but capable in a crisis of delivering only spasms of sound. My muscles remembered what to do, but my panic-stricken mind roamed around the galaxy, the past, anywhere but the music I was playing. The performance was a catastrophe, made worse by the presence of Grace, whose white, full-moon face loomed like an apparition at the porthole window of the vestibule leading into the recital hall, her ears alert to errors.

After this mortifying defeat I grew indifferent to performing music in public and then gave it up altogether. I took a degree in English.

14.

Miniatures are easy to overlook or lose. They vanish quickly from consciousness. Sadly, they have no standing in the pianistic repertory. I have attended countless recitals, but I have never heard programmed any of the miniatures that I have found. Miniatures remain private, not public expressions of interiority—music played for oneself. They require the performer to act simultaneously as

interpreter and audience. They close the circuit between listener and producer by making those functions identical.

Miniatures can dissipate before the listener has entered the promises and expectations laid out by the score. Gone before it is heard, the miniature attests to the transience of a sound as it passes through states of disintegration, the effect that musicologists call, with intimations of luxuriousness, decay. The first miniature in Eric Gaudibert’s *Quatre Miniatures* lumbers hypnotically around two notes as a challenge to the decay of sound over time. Finding its equivalent in permanent material things—miniature objects—the piano miniature resists decay. It finishes before decay sets in.

Sometimes, miniatures are about specific rhythms, as in the fourth piece in Gaudibert’s *Quatre Miniatures*, which is built around four consecutive sixteenth notes that return at irregular intervals. The left hand stalks around these sixteenth-note utterances, throwing out the pianist’s concerted effort to count with the care of a timpanist. Gaudibert’s four miniatures, for all their beauty, are maddening exercises in counting, even when the time is strictly metrical, such as the unvarying 4/4 measures in the fourth miniature.

Sometimes, piano miniatures explore technique with étude-like concentration. Eric Tanguy scores his *Sept Miniatures* with a mind for different kinds of keyboard touches. The first in the group, labeled *très doux*, meaning very gentle or very soft, could be played portamento without pedal to create a texture of sparseness. Or, it could be played legato to emphasize melodic direction, without, I would add, mimicking a human singing voice. Tanguy does not give directions about touch, which leaves the possibility of applying different touches to the discretion of the pianist. By contrast Tanguy marks the third miniature in the set *très lié*, or very connected, which retrospectively indicates that the first miniature may not be as smooth as it initially appears.

Joaquín Turina uses image-provoking titles for the eight pieces in his suite of *Miniaturas*: “Walking,” “The Soldiers Approach,” “The Sleeping Village,” “Dawn,” “The Market,” “Sentimental Duet,” “Holiday,” and “The Return.” No program unites these eight pieces, despite a listener’s desire to see a walker crossing the path of soldiers, passing through a village, singing a duet, and so forth. Dawn, after all, arrives only in the fourth miniature. To unify the elements in Turina’s *Miniaturas* into a program would locate the music in a single consciousness, which defies the nature of miniatures as alternatives to consciousness. Taken together these pieces multiply events or states of mind. They do not sustain a single perspective that unites soldiers, promenades, times of day. Organization in Turina’s assemblage of

miniatures remains pell-mell. He riffs on the challenge to habits of classification that miniatures throw down.

What the microscope is to the eye, the miniature is to the ear: it magnifies sonic relations by isolating or shrinking sounds down to eensy proportions. In this sense the piano miniature is a metaphor for a unique acoustic event, one that requires no proof outside itself. The Lilliputian length of the miniature calls attention to details that do not need to have a relation to a larger whole. Fineness of effect becomes an end in itself, just as the excessive nicety of the Lilliputians' manners in *Gulliver's Travels* marks them as unreasonable and, in the full etymological sense of the term, petty—very little indeed.

15.

In 1998, I decided to study the piano seriously again after years of unregistered playing. Taking lessons later in life required negotiation with previous failures. I laid down a few ground rules with Diane Werner, my teacher at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. Public performance did not interest me, I informed her. I did not want to take annual performance exams. I would not perfect just two or three pieces of music, especially when there was so much piano repertory to explore. Nor would I consent to waste time on technical exercises. However counter-intuitive these rules may seem to a piano teacher, this program liberated me. I gobbled up scores. In ten months I learned several Haydn sonatas, some songs and dances by Mompou, three late Brahms intermezzi, a Mozart sonata, two Bach French suites (in G-minor and F-major), Beethoven's Sonata in D-major, op. 26, the *Drei Romanzen* by Schumann, and other works that I wanted to learn.

I have never played so well in my life. I finally understood the allures of eighteenth-century music, its delicacies, its coy charms. I worked on abbreviated and legato touches in Haydn. Bar by bar I worked out phrasing in Bach.

To emphasize clarity of sound, I thought about pedal technique. I practiced approaches to and departures from the surface of the keys to enhance melodic contours. I listened to the sounds I was producing and judged them according to the effects I wanted to create.

After a year of mind-expanding lessons, Diane Werner dumped me. She aduced a series of shallow pretexts. "Oh," she said when I called to arrange a time for a second year of lessons, "I thought you weren't coming back. And I've not been feeling well. I'm keeping only a handful of students." She lacked the courage to say that she wanted students who tirelessly rehearsed two or three pieces of

music in preparation for an exam. As I subsequently discovered, she kept all the other students in her studio that year.

All my stories about the piano concern betrayal.

16.

"Every good Bach listener is a miniature Bach," writes Carl Sandburg in "Those Who Make Poems," an essay written in 1942. Sandburg offers a distressing notion of listening. He presumes that the listener duplicates the composer's premises, his acoustic abilities, his habits of hearing—all in miniature. Yet, every listener hears differently, just as no two people see or remember a visual event in the same way. Moreover, a listener need not be a homunculus in relation to Bach, shriveled and secondary to the composer's intentions. Listening need not be an afterthought to composing. The musician plays in order to listen, not to make himself heard.

Alfred Brendel once pointed out in a television interview that *listen* is an anagram for *silent* in the English language. Kenneth Sherman speculates on why this anagram may be troubling: "Many synonyms of the term silent have uneasy and negative connotations. They include: mute, speechless, sullen, saturnine, taciturn, reticent, inarticulate."

My friends listen badly. While I play the piano, they walk around, dial cell phones, rummage in the fridge, drink cocktails. At first I thought my playing was deficient. Then I realized that my friends hear music as background noise and seldom as an intellectual experience. Performances test listeners, not the abilities of the performer.

17.

Miniatures come in sets. Small things take refuge among other small things. Like loose diamonds on a tray, a set of miniatures may have no necessary order besides the one imposed by numbering. Miniatures do not illuminate a whole, because each presumes wholeness within itself. Why not play a single miniature and call it a day?

A collection of miniatures serializes experience. Numbered pieces in a set of miniatures could extend to infinity. To create the semblance of conclusion, composers impose endings. Von Rossum calls his twelfth miniature "Finale," which leaves no doubt about intention. In his eighth and last piece in *Miniaturas*, entitled "The Return," Turina quotes the first in the series as a means of migrating back to the beginning. Notwithstanding such formal constraints and the sense of

conclusion, miniatures use seriality—the principle of ordering pieces by number—to create dimension. A collection of miniatures makes each one more visible or audible. It is easier to misplace one loose pearl than it is to misplace a whole row of pearls strung on a necklace. Seriality allows a cumulative sense of meaning. Each separate miniature seeks its montage, which is the set within which the miniature belongs. To create a set of miniatures is to shrink the world to a scale of manageable distance.

18.
For reasons that I cannot specify exactly, I keep a list of famous people who, in their spare time, play the piano or who have musical training. The painter John Singer Sargent played the piano with brio. Roland Barthes and André Gide beguiled hours at the piano with, respectively, Schumann and Chopin. Theodor Adorno, a musicologist before being a cultural critic, reputedly inspired the character Kretschmar in Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, from which one might conclude that Adorno had a rather pedantic approach to the keyboard. Friedrich Nietzsche not only played the piano, but composed stentorian klavier music. Some things, really, are better left undone.

George Eliot played four hands and, I would guess, sometimes two. Someone once reported to me that Edward Said played Mozart exquisitely. American novelist Nicholson Baker trained as a musician at Eastman Conservatory, but he is clearly a woodwind player, not a pianist—something about his shaggy appearance and grizzled beard. Few pianists, besides Krystian Zimerman and Garrick Ohlsson, have beards.

Canadian novelist Barbara Gowdy is alleged to have been a talented pianist in her youth, but I cannot confirm this rumor. Novelist Nancy Huston is clearly a musician through and through; I can tell by her understanding of timbre and cadences in *The Mark of the Angel*, but I bet that she plays harpsichord or flute, probably something baroque.

This list proves nothing except my penchant for lists.

19.
One of the inset tales in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*, called “The New Melusina,” concerns a pixie princess who lives in a box. When the tiny princess slides a magic ring on her finger, she swells to human stature. On the urging of her royal parents and court advisers, she consorts with the human world in order to breed and reverse the terrible trend toward ever-shrinking proportions that

doom her race. “For since nothing can last forever in the world, but everything that has once been great, must become small and decrease,” claims the dwarf princess, “we, too, are in this case, that since the creation of the world we have always been decreasing and getting smaller, and above all the others the royal family, which on account of the purity of its blood, is the first to be subjected to this destiny.” Her brother, the prince, was “born so small, that the nurses actually lost him out of his swaddling clothes and no one knows whither he has gone.” The princess has cultivated tastes and an enchanting singing voice. Eventually, she finds a man with whom she breeds. She makes a strange choice. He drinks, gambles, womanizes, loses money, despises music. They are happy together.

Several times the minuscule princess leaves the company of her husband. In her absence the fellow resumes his debauches. The princess reappears as if by magic whenever he needs financial help.

Having declared her plight to her human husband, the pixie princess allows him to carry her about in a locked box, which, seen up close, is actually a beautifully appointed palace in miniature. Thus some lovers diminish those they love in order to keep them. When she finally grows tired of his dissolute ways, the princess threatens to leave permanently and sings a song of farewell. Unable to relinquish his elfin wife, the human husband agrees to shrink to her proportions. Once in the dwarf kingdom, however, he hates his captivity and plots to leave by filing off the magic ring that his wife has slid onto his finger.

In Goethe’s narrative the miniature involves fantasies of refuge and escape. One wishes to escape into the world of tininess; once there one wishes to flee that cramped world. The pixie princess enacts her own escape by returning to her kingdom when her husband becomes too unruly. She flees the human world. Reciprocally, her husband thinks that he will find happiness in the detailed fineness of the miniature kingdom. The miniature, by soliciting intense concentration on details, is a metaphor for the will to escape into the material world or thought. The miniature makes an emblem of fine discriminations.

Walter Benjamin, a connoisseur of tininess, pored over miniatures—stamps, toys, snow-globes—and wrote in a script so tiny that he aspired to get a hundred lines on a single sheet of paper. As Susan Sontag writes in “Under the Sign of Saturn,” Benjamin’s mania for microscopy bespeaks a fascination with finding minute distinctions. In tandem with his micrography, Benjamin practiced an imploded prose style, “as if each sentence had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes,” as Sontag claims. As Goethe’s “The New Melusina” indicates, however, the flight into miniaturized

worlds can instigate a counter desire to flee from the narrow dimensions imposed by the inward gaze. The miniature offers no sanctuary from the cares of the world. It offers instead only the apparition of solace—cares that shrink when seen from the perspective of eternity.

20.

Ivan Karabyts' second miniature buzzes. From the first bar a burst of tremolos creates a tense overlap of harmonies and enharmonics. By a contradiction of motion, the tremolos, arcing between two notes, convey stasis in movement. One does not hear a chord or a melodic note but something in between—a buzz. The tremolos eventually push away from the center of the keyboard, where the miniature starts, into higher and lower registers. Right and left hands shun each other at wide distances. By bar six the tremolos yield to single repeated notes, as if the repetition of a pitch and its escalation into note clusters will break through a sound or time barrier. On repeated notes there is motion without movement.

The score spatializes at bar nine, creating a visual and sonic liftoff effected through repetition. Although Karabyts calls for multiple repetitions of note clusters, there are physical limits to the number of repetitions a pianist can execute to bring off this feat, especially if one sustains the allegro tempo required by the piece. I rule out the possibility that this passage demands a complicated, multi-finger glissando. Excluding that possibility I conjecture that a hasty swoosh along white keys will do the trick. Whichever keys I manage to hit in the duration of a single beat will have to satisfy the demand for a burst of noise. Here time moves toward a configuration in space. The visual effect of this notation makes spatiality evident. Time necessarily slows down as note clusters accumulate. Karabyts compounds the effect of grandeur by demanding spacious eighth-note chords immediately after clusters hurry to opposite directions on the keyboard at bars ten through twelve. He adds a beat at bar twelve by shifting into 5/4 time, as against 4/4 everywhere else in the miniature. In contrast to the tremolos and the repeated notes earlier, the wide-open chords draw attention to harmony as an effect of simultaneity, the suspension, as it were, of time.

Karabyts' second miniature lasts approximately 40 seconds.

21.

Piano miniatures make a bid to transcend temporal constraints. The miniature keeps an eye on eternity. In William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence," shrinkage makes eternity graspable:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Most interpreters of Blake's poem view every grain of sand as imprinted with the contours of a whole world. Looked at aright the miniature contains a cosmos. Likewise, every hour might contain an intimation of eternity if one would be open to that possibility. In any given hour one might acquire a giant's perspective. Despite these interpretations Blake's poem may mean that the minuscule, no matter how long it is contemplated, does not inevitably yield infinity. Eternity may not be accessible in every single hour. Blake's poem may mean that just one, unforeseeable, random hour will provide entry into eternity. Maybe only one grain of sand from the agglomerated billions of sand specks contains a world. Not every miniature affords completeness. Yet every miniature aspires to eternity, brief though such a glimpse may turn out to be.