

Martin Kleinman

Diablo: The Life and Times of No. 414666

“Music is not sound. Music is using sound to organize emotions in time.” – Krystian Zimerman, pianist
“Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.” Max Planck, father of Quantum Physics

I

No. 414666 was young once.

This one thousand-pound, nine-foot long baby was conceived in 1969 and took eight long months to enter the world. The European artisans responsible for his final inspection were surprised by the infant’s brash personality. They shook their heads, dismayed by the wild one’s raw dynamics. They dubbed the crude concert grand “Diablo”, a reference to both the beast’s sonics and the last three digits of its serial number.

The polished ebony child was packed with great care. Portside seagulls screeched through chill grey skies as a loading crane lowered Diablo into the hold of a Hamburg freighter bound for the New World. Inside its protective padding, attached to the requisite customs documentation, was a hand-written note of introduction from the piano’s production team: *“Ich bin Diablo.”*

Diablo was not of living flesh. But, being crafted by hand, he was the fruit of humankind and, in that sense, very much alive. Encoded within its very DNA, somewhere deep in the molecular structure of its hand-selected woods, steel, felt, and brass, Diablo was afraid. He shuddered as the cargo ship sailed through the swells of the roiling North Atlantic, for there was fever in the air. The cells of its Sitka spruce soundboard resonated with the drumbeat of tragic news: the Cambodian invasion, the massacre of four Kent State kids, the convulsion of the global economy and the rampant crime that ravaged Diablo’s new hometown, New York.

After weeks at sea, this immigrant was trucked from the harbor dock, to a drafty warehouse and, finally, to his new home. Diablo, being a stoic from Mittel Europa, first feigned indifference, but Diablo sulked as its innards swelled and contracted, for the woods within had not yet forgotten their ancient past. The key to Diablo's success would depend upon a certain degree of magic, an alchemy that must transcend his design and manufacture. But acclimatization to the Carnegie Hall stage on the West Side of Manhattan proved daunting and Diablo's new masters despaired.

II

After yet another futile attempt to tame the beast, the venue's master piano technician, Irv Waloshin, shook his shock of prematurely grey hair. "He's going to be one of the all-time greats, if only he would settle," Irv told his buddy, Herschel, on the way to lunch one day as they dodged the yellow cabs that hurtled down Seventh Avenue. With the sensitivity of safe-crackers, and armed with a full complement of levers and mutes, they labored until each octave was tuned to the temperament. Irv and Herschel, excellent pianists in their own right, then put Diablo through his paces all that morning. But weeks after the piano's arrival, things were still, somehow, not jelling.

Irv lit a hand-rolled Bugler, hoisted his pastrami sandwich, and idly rubbed the thirty-year old numeric tattoo on the underside of his left forearm, a souvenir of his Buchenwald beginnings. "A regular monster, I'm telling you. This Diablo someday can be a rocket ship! But, so far, all I see is classic underachievement."

Herschel grinned. "Diablo is scared," the father of four said. "He's just a kid, still a greenhorn, like we were. Remember? We were afraid of our own shadows when we got here after the war."

Irv cocked his head, unsure. Not every piano crafted in Germany was destined for superstardom. Like a Mercedes automobile built in Stuttgart, most were magnificent machines, but Irv understood that some were nothing but trouble from day one.

"Diablo? He is like a wild bronco in the cowboy pictures," Herschel said. "But that's *now*. Just you wait. I bet this *vilde chiya* will sing real good someday."

III

Herschel was proven right for, in time, Diablo relaxed, and breathed great plumes of magical music that flowed with unparalleled nuance. Carnegie Hall, Diablo was assured, would be his forever home. He became justly revered by classical pianists for his power, precision and clarity. Mediocre players sounded wonderful, and the truly gifted ascended to otherworldly heights.

An English pop star in a yellow silk tuxedo once kissed Diablo after one performance. But the greatest accolade came from Zimerman, famously picky about his choice of instrument. The Austrian maestro was delighted by Diablo's dynamics and requested the beast whenever he performed in New York.

At the start of each performance, he would settle in front of middle C and mutter, "*Ich liebe dich, mein Diablo.*" And while few actually believed him, Zimerman would confide to intimates with certainty that Diablo's reply resonated through the master's fingertips, "*Ich liebe dich auch, Krystian.*"

IV

The decades passed, along with classical music's elderly audiences. The music industry's business model morphed to the point where a million streams netted a recording artist a mere \$4,000. Desperate to even the odds of success, talented young classical musicians were encouraged by their enterprising agents to pound pyrotechnical performances. These were considered too loud, too brash, and too crude by the standard bearers of the genre's old guard.

But the profession was seduced by the packed houses. Dollar signs danced in their eyes. The suits and skirts of the classically trained performers got skimpier, the audiences got younger, and revenues swelled.

V

The injury proved serious.

Diablo, now in late middle age, always delivered, and was still revered by pianists who came to Carnegie from all over the world. Emboldened by enduring success, and unencumbered by the fears of youth, the concert grand sang like a youngster and was ever eager to perform. But an internationally acclaimed young pianist, a rising supernova, was indifferent to Diablo's advanced years and practiced for his Rachmaninoff marathon with

reckless abandon. Finally, during a third consecutive go-around on Rach Three, Diablo faltered, wracked with mechanical pain.

The piano soldiered on and the show was a resounding success. The reviews were ecstatic. The young man's performance was hailed by reviewers as "dazzling", "poetic", "monumental", although purists considered the nearly five-hour concert a vulgar display of gimmickry that would have Sergei Rachmaninoff spin in his grave.

Diablo agreed with the latter assessment. The magical instrument, now removed from the Carnegie stage, shivered, hurt and alone, and muttered "That was not a performance! That was a hot dog eating contest set to music."

VI

Diablo was sold, and the piano felt flush with a fear absent for so many years. His new owner was the renowned music school up the street, housed in an angry-looking, Brutalist building. But at least it was relatively new, which Diablo supposed was a good thing for a city that was falling apart, financially and spiritually.

Unlike his first transport to New York City, Diablo was barely protected from the elements of the New York winter. Stagehands wheeled him off the truck. Covered only by thin furniture pads, Diablo peeked across the street at the plaza's fountain, shivered, and sighed in resignation as freezing pigeons pecked at cigarette butts.

It wasn't going to be that bad, Diablo rationalized, feeling lucky to remain a cherished citizen in this oasis of culture. The piano's injuries were repaired, for Hamburg pianos such as Diablo are overbuilt, designed for long-term durability. But the years had taken a toll. In order to complete the sale, Irv and Herschel had worked their magic and brought the beast back from the dead, but privately they shook their heads as they waved goodbye and good luck.

Diablo, they thought, was done.

VII

The service elevator doors opened and Diablo was dollied onto the stage of Paul Hall for the piano's first post-operative concert. The student recital at the school was to be a program of works by Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, and Brahms. Diablo heard the buzz of pre-concert energy from the lobby, which was filled with fellow students holding their instrument cases, the soloist's family, and the few remaining neighborhood pensioners who cherished the genre and attended every free performance.

Diablo's repaired soundboard resonated with excitement. A stage is a stage, he reasoned, whether the hall holds 275 or 3,500. The young pianist, a Ph.D. candidate and lecturer at the school, was well practiced but Diablo sensed her fear. Therese, a thin twenty-year old, wore a fine floor-length dress. The audience applauded her entry as she wobbled across the stage in high-heeled shoes. She bowed, sat, and caressed Diablo's keys. Through her trembling fingertips, Diablo whispered, "Relax. You are in good hands."

Therese's performance was flawless and earned a top grade from her professors. At the after-party backstage, she told all her friends about the sensation of playing Diablo. "I adore this piano," she fluttered. "It was as if I was on auto-pilot and he was guiding me." From his position on-stage, Diablo heard her and sensed that, at this stage in her young life, artistic excellence was her only passion. He trembled with love of the music, for Therese, and the bold optimism of her youth. "I was young, once, like her," Diablo thought. "How I cherish this life!"

In April of 2020, the school went into lockdown.

VIII

Diablo, distressed by un-played tension, sat idle for many months in the school's chilly sub-basement. The building's silence unnerved Diablo, who loved the electric energy of the students here in the world's most selective school of music.

And he worried, too, about Therese. He had no doubt she was doomed to six-hour practice sessions on lowly digital keyboards, and was no longer able to partake of the joy of being young, talented and attractive in New York City. Was she safe; was she sick? And what of her flock of friends?

Each week of lockdown stressed Diablo's innards, and siphoned more of the instrument's magic and the residual joy accrued from decades of performances. Finally, every measure of Diablo's mojo was gone.

IX

It took nearly two years for the school to reopen. Diablo was tuned with care by Mario Cruz, the school's chief piano technician. The despair in Mario's face told Diablo everything. A post-pandemic pitch correction was only the start of Diablo's treatment, for the prognosis was as it would be for any athlete who tried to return to top form after so many months of complete inactivity. In the best interest of both the students and the instrument, Mario's recommendation was to demote Diablo to a practice room on the school's fifth floor.

And so the aged behemoth that once graced the Carnegie Hall stage was shoehorned into a smallish space chockablock with cheap tablet-arm chairs, music stands, and a pine casket-sized harpsichord with nicotine-tan keys. Diablo was unceremoniously pounded upon by precocious undergraduates as the harpsichord, laughingly nicknamed "Lurch" by school custodians, stood silent sentry to this abuse.

Therese, however, proved to be Diablo's savior, for she spread the news of the piano's reassignment. Soon this particular practice room, with its aged Hamburg concert grand, was booked all day and long into the night by her coterie of earnest young musicians.

Tales of Diablo's magic abounded. A student of composition, new to the intricacies of the piano, suddenly handled even the most advanced pieces with power and finesse. Another musician, in the jazz program, beguiled her friends with startling sheets of Art Tatum-like runs. A Chicago blues aficionado found his performances infused with the heartbreak of Muddy Waters' pianist, Otis Spann. Diablo even helped a Parisian friend of Therese, a freshman in the school's theater program, channel years of cold, leaky-roof Montmartre nights to deliver a wrenching rendition of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1* on her very first try, left-hand jumps be damned.

“She plays the music of that little oddball?” Lurch hissed to Therese as she sat idly by the harpsichord’s keyboard while her friend played. “Satie? The man expelled from the Conservatoire de Paris not once, but twice, only to invent music for bank lobbies?”

Therese revered Diablo and, in turn, the piano admired the young pianist’s skill and respect for her art. She brought a candelabrum to every practice room session. Dressed in a full-length black dress graced by her dear grandmother’s seed-pearl necklace, she dimmed the overhead lights, approached the bench, and placed her tablet on the music rest. Her manicured nails brushed Diablo’s keyboard.

“I love you,” she whispered to Diablo one lovely spring night.

Through her fingertips, Therese received a reply: “I love you, too, Therese.”

X

The months passed. Summer came and went, the cool evening air of New York returned, and at long last Diablo was fully at peace with his new environment, for it felt right for this stage of his life.

The students returned from their summer adventures. In rapt attention, they listened to Diablo and Lurch as they traded war stories of fine concerts past. The harpsichord, they learned, was another music magician from bygone years, lovingly restored for students in the historical performance program.

“Slower! Slower! Arch your fingers! I will help you,” Diablo would patiently remind the beginners, first-year composition students, as they fumbled through their practice session scales. To get the most from each practice session, Diablo advised students to listen, focus, and break the more difficult sections of the score into small pieces, maintaining consistent finger choreography.

The ever-patient Diablo won the hearts of Therese’s awestruck friends. But as the leaves of autumn fell, Diablo found the infamy of lesser students’ mediocrity unendurable. In despair over one student’s overwrought rendition of a Schumann chorale, Diablo’s keyboard buzzed the words of Paul Verlaine to the startled young man: “Nuance! We want nuance! Take eloquence and wring its neck!”

Diablo’s impatience grew. “No! No!” Diablo chided one technically proficient but artless student. “You must understand the composer’s intent! You know everything and yet understand nothing!” The young woman

flung the door open, in tears as, from the hallway, Diablo heard a mother dressing down her tense teen son, post-audition.

“Therese’s friends revere the process,” Lurch observed. “The others play too hard, or too soft. No understanding of the emotional dynamics.”

“Or maybe just no intelligence, only money and parental pressure,” Diablo whispered.

“My friend,” Lurch chuckled, “I’m afraid we’ve become crotchety old fogies.”

Diablo could only sigh, for his stable mate, he feared, was right.

XI

Diablo sunk deep into despair as the days grew short. During a student’s dreary rendition of Debussy’s “La Mer”, Diablo saw Therese’s smile through the small window of the practice room door. The piano’s soundboard vibrated with new energy.

Mercifully, the Debussy assassin’s session concluded. Therese tapped on the door with respect for the artist and bounded in as the lad gathered his belongings and left.

“I have a new student for you,” Therese said. “He’s an adult learner, someone I know quite well, and I think you two will hit it off.” She sat down, played the opening measures of Chopin’s Ballade No. 4 in F minor and, through her fingers, Diablo channeled the exquisite control of Zimerman on the stage of Carnegie. In that small space, Therese’s version was celestial, a masterful performance savored only by the molecules of time.

“His name is Charles. He is my father,” Therese whispered at the conclusion of the piece.

XII

The grizzled old man with the work-thickened fingers visited Diablo every Wednesday with metronomic regularity, and would wait by the door well before their start time of 8 p.m. Diablo sensed Charles’ burning desire to make beautiful art and, with every bit of his waning gifts, the piano lifted the arthritic retiree high into music heaven. Young students would peer through the practice room window and gasp at the excellence of the greybeard in his rough canvas clothes. Each session was more than a musical performance; it

was dressage, with pianist and piano in perfect synchrony. Diablo gifted Charles the whole package: touch, precision, power, nuance, and unmatched pedaling expertise.

The old man put No. 414666 through his paces every week. By winter break, Charles miraculously swirled through *Le Clavier Bien Tempéré* with rare intelligence. “You have a gift, sir,” Diablo noted. “It was always within you, just waiting to blossom. I can see where your daughter gets her skill.”

“Thank you for helping me,” Charles said. “This is all I ever wanted, since I was a small boy. For so long, I worked with my hands so that Therese could work with her soul. Finally, my life feels complete.”

XIII

Diablo feared the worst one Wednesday in late February when the practice room wall clock struck eight and Charles had still not arrived.

“It’s cold and icy,” Lurch reasoned. “Give him time.”

Diablo sulked.

XIV

“You have earned your rest,” Irv Waloshin said. Therese found the retired Carnegie Hall master piano technician out in a New Jersey assisted living facility and got him into town to visit Diablo. “Think of how many musicians you helped, how much joy you gave the world, since you first came to this country in, what was it? Nineteen-seventy?”

Therese, her eyes red-rimmed, caressed Diablo’s keyboard, walked over to Lurch, and played the Aria from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* on the old harpsichord.

“Arch those fingers,” Diablo sniffed at his protégé, even as cracks reappeared in his Sitka spruce soundboard and his strings of high-tensile Swedish steel, under more than 30,000 pounds of force for so many years, stretched to the breaking point. No. 414666, once so young and so brash, was now but a relic, old and infirm, with faded memories of glory.

“I’m still here, with you, my friend,” Irv said as he sat beside Diablo. The old master craftsman idly rubbed his forearm tattoo, turned to Therese, and then, to Lurch. “And we all shall live on, as long as there are people here on Earth to remember.”

###