

I Can Hear You by Katharina Mevissen
Sample translation by William Burn

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1

I'm one of the breathers. I breathe with the music, feeding it air to stop it – and me – suffocating. Some pieces don't need much air, but others leave me completely out of breath so by the end I'm panting, gasping, wheezing, sighing. Susanne thinks it sounds asthmatic, though Philipp says it's sporty. I don't know how many times people have aped the way I flare my nostrils and wrinkle my nose. I can't imagine I look that stupid when I play the cello, but what can you do? When it comes down to it every musician has their own face and there's not much you can do about stubborn tics and quirks.

I started when I was four, before I'd even learned to read and write – or fight, chatter, play ball, trade stuff, all those essentials you learn in school. Music came ahead of everything, with football a close second. At fifteen I already wanted to get away, away from our three-room flat (father, aunt, brother), my father and his music. From any music at all. But it followed me, and kept following me until I stopped and turned around. It turned into a standoff – who would blink first?

I did. I gave in. We got back together, just like when you're in love for the first time and give it one more go. You know something isn't right but there's enough there to keep it going. You think you can't bear to be without the other person, and you get close again so quickly, get used to them, bicker with them, need them. So at first I could, then I couldn't and then realised, I really could study the cello. I think I would say I've got on ok. The new start was working out. Until my father.

2

I'm propped against the double doors, looking down over the backs of everyone's heads to watch Yoko's face as she plays the Chopin sonata. Her face is almost motionless, like the surface of a lake. When Yoko plays the cello it looks just like most people imagine it: romantic, intent, eyes shut, every now and again a sigh. Her face is elegant, her fingers precise. The audience might believe it was completely effortless, or maybe some great passion or pain, quiet and beautiful. They would never believe that music can be a beast that torments from within until there is not a note left in you.

But not everyone looks as perfect as Yoko. Lots of musicians move, follow the sound, brow furrowed, lips pursed, foot tapping, head shaking, nodding. There are those whose faces are animated by an even stronger force, turbulent, almost wild, as if fighting or dancing with the music, snorting, rocking, humming, melting, urging, dreaming, everything. Igor plays

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that way and I could watch him for hours; it's a storm. But as soon as he packs his bow away he transforms back into a polite, slightly awkward guy.

Applause sweeps around the hall and the door behind me opens.

'Os, we're on!' Igor urges, behind me. He's already got his violin tucked under his arm.

I pick up my cello and follow the others onto the stage, at last seeing the audience for the benefit concert from the front, faces here to listen to music – they're not afraid of it, are they? – and my glance skims over them. Then it snags on something.

No, no way. What are the boys doing here?

Shoulders back, Susanne draws herself up behind her double bass. Igor lifts his violin. Philipp shuffles the stool towards the piano and gives his fingers a shake. Manu is next to him, turning pages. I stick my cello spike into the stage and straighten up. Then I notice that my shirt is uncomfortably tight under my arms.

We exchange glances, tune up. A few grunts from the middle rows, then it's still, everything tenses. It's like those last few seconds before a sprint when you're in the blocks, your weight tilted slightly forward. Philipp gives a curt nod and we're off, the fifty metre Mendelssohn sprint, fleet and flying. Pulse hammering, you hardly touch the ground. I feel like I'm hanging on just a few millimetres behind, the sound fractionally delayed before it reaches me. We fly through the piece up to the first double bar, then we get slower, lighter, tripping along on fingertips and tip-toes, pizzicato. Here at last you can take a breath. First movement done.

I knew it. The boys start clapping as soon as the movement ends. They're the only ones in the room doing it. They're not bothered by the silent disapproval of their well-to-do neighbours. They hardly even try to stifle their laughter.

We go on: second, third movements, finale. Applause. As we take our bow, Maik, Streifke, Dino and Wilma give us the thumbs-up and wave as if they were on the terraces, not in the Tchaikovsky Hall. The grey-haired ladies next to them don't like it. To them, classical music is right up there with teaching Latin and Greek in school, so they've forked out handsomely for the charity concert tonight. I hustle offstage.

Susanne pushes the double doors shut behind us, cutting us off from the applause welcoming the next performers, a duo.

'Who were those idiots?' she snorts.

'Guys, I'm so sorry. They're mine,' I admit, starting to undo the top button of my uncomfortably tight shirt.

'Did you ask them to come?'

'God no! It was their idea.'

'Mates of yours?'

'Lads from my football team.'

Susanne's grinning now. 'I suppose we should count ourselves lucky.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah – at least the whole team didn't come.'

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'The others are all right, really. These guys don't have a lot in the way of manners.'

I can't stop tugging at my shirt.

'That's too small for you,' Susanne observes.

'I know. It's my flatmate's. Mine was so dirty I couldn't wear it.'

'Have you only got one shirt?!'

'Nah, I've got plenty, well, in theory I have, but I was in a rush...'

Susanne giggles.

'Behave!' hisses Manu. 'They're starting out there.'

By the time Susanne and I get into the foyer after the concert, Manu's already lined up the fizz. She pushes past little groups of rich pensioners and offers us the tray. 'Where are Igor and Philipp?'

'They got talked to death already...'

We clink glasses. 'Here's to our benefactors,' I declaim. We giggle.

Arm in arm, a couple is heading our way. She's beaming at me. 'Such wonderful music! And such a wonderful instrument. I do love the cello...' she gushes.

I smile. 'Yes, me too,' I say quietly. Manu stifles a laugh.

The lady glances at her programme. 'Are you ... Osman ... Engels?'

'Yes, that's me,' I reply politely, knowing exactly what is coming next. My parents did my brother and me the favour of naming us after our grandfathers: Osman and Wilhelm. It always goes down a storm with the older crowd.

'That really is a most interesting name. Might I inquire where...?' Her gaze wanders down the row of buttons on my shirt and back up again.

'From the Ottoman Empire,' mutters her husband. His top lip is hidden behind a white moustache.

'Yes, exactly. The Ottoman Empire.' I nod seriously.

'But your surname...?'

'It's from the Ruhr. It can be traced back as far as Wilhelm I.'

'Ah.' She takes a sip of her sekt. 'So your family comes from the Ottoman...'

'From Turkey, Annette. The Ottoman Empire was in existence until 1918 – exactly as long, I might say, as the Prussian Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm II.'

'I'm from the Ruhr.'

'Ah yes, but your forebears...'

Manu breaks in and asks, 'So, your forebears, where are they from exactly?'

The lady stares, shocked. 'Oh ... err, my ...?'

'Ooosman Engels!' a voice bellows. I spot Dino working his way towards us through the crowd.

'Please, do excuse me,' I smile and go over to Dino who gives me a hearty slap on the back and steers me straight over to the boys. On the way to the far end of the foyer he intercepts a waiter carrying a large platter loaded with tiny little canapés.

‘Just a mo, can I just ... what are all these goodies?’ he asks and starts clearing the platter straight away.

Before the waiter has had the chance to furnish him with an answer to his question, Dino already has ten canapés piled up on his plate.

‘Dino!’ I groan, tugging at his arm.

‘Sounds good, though, doesn’t it? Let’s have a taste.’ He nods, grinning, and raises his mound of canapés over his head while we push our way through.

Maik is studying the Minted Do-Gooders Club brochure. The group dedicates itself to improving educational opportunities for disadvantaged children in Hamburg’s deprived areas. Wilma and Streifke have sat down on the steps with their glasses of sekt and are rolling cigarettes.

‘What are you doing here?’ I hiss, even though I’m secretly chuffed that the four of them have turned up. A knot of charitable types with dainty selections of canapés on their serviettes look disapprovingly at Dino and me as they drift past.

‘We take a great interest in music and education,’ Wilma begins.

‘We’re well proud of you, Engels,’ Dino breaks in, continuing his commentary with his mouth full of food. ‘Nice shirt, by the way, but your buttons are done up wrong.’

I look down at myself and groan.

‘Dino, what are you munching on? Give us a look.’ Wilma beckons Dino over to him.

‘No idea. Little bits of something expensive, probably. Get some for yourself. You can’t share them. Don’t know how they’re supposed to fill you up, though.’ Dino demolishes the last three canapés in one go.

‘Bro, fix us up with a plate,’ Wilma says.

Streifke raises his glass towards me. ‘This stuff is rank. Nice work tonight.’

I grab the rollie he’s just put down on his knee.

‘Smoke?’

‘Engels, your buddy’s coming over.’

Susanne is hurrying towards us on her high heels. She draws herself up in front of us. Wilma and Streifke examine her suspiciously, Dino nods and wipes his mouth.

‘You are the most embarrassing audience I’ve ever seen at a concert in the conservatoire.’

‘Now where was I?’ Wilma goes on. ‘Of course, education and intercultural dialogue are very important to us. We take great pains to familiarise rich people such as these with the unique socio-cultural praxes of our milieu. It gives them a rounded education, one might say.’

Susanne looks unimpressed. Her gaze lands on my shirt buttons. ‘You’ve buttoned your shirt up wrong,’ she remarks.

‘I told him that already,’ says Dino, giving her a wink. ‘Cool instrument. Well big.’

Susanne raises an eyebrow and gives him a stern look as she empties her glass.

‘Nothing gets past you, does it?’ she says pointedly, tapping the side of her nose.

Dino rubs a hand over his face. ‘Do one?’

‘Fam, can we go somewhere we can get a beer?’ Streifke begs. ‘I can’t stomach much more of this.’

‘What exactly?’ I ask, grinning.

I’m determined to put the whole thing behind me as quickly as I can. I’ll buy the cheapest black shirt they have in stock.

It only takes a few minutes for me to lose my way in the department store. The walkways are cluttered with display cases, remainders and discount baskets, and the escalators always take you to the wrong floor. I turn around when I get to the hosiery department – I’m probably not even on the right floor, am I? – and go back across the womenswear section. A song from the eighties is blaring out of the loudspeakers, and something inside me falters. There was something there. I stop where I am, next to the evening dresses. The song thumps on, ‘Voyage, voyage’ by Desireless. I’m standing among the black dresses, ankle-length and knee-length, the fabric shimmering, rustling. Their plunging backs seem even lower when the hair is done up to leave the nape of the neck uncovered. There was something there. I reach into the black fabric – concert-dress material – and press my eyes shut. An image is pushing into my mind.

My parents, Suat and Doris, in their elegant, black clothes, their concert outfits, in the kitchen. It’s late in the evening, long since dark, and only the light in the extractor hood is turned on. Doris is sitting on the tabletop in her long, black dress. Her hair is pinned up, but a few strands have broken loose and fallen onto her bare back.

I’m watching from behind them. Suat’s standing in front of her, stroking his hands down her arms. He says something, grins, and she laughs. Just audible on the kitchen radio – ‘Voyage, voyage’. Suat lifts Doris down from the table and carries her through the kitchen. It looks like a dance and they laugh quietly, then they close the kitchen door and the frosted glass blurs the scene. I’m standing in the dark hallway of our flat. The sounds and the black silhouettes merge and blur into each other.

‘Can I help?’

I can see clearly again. A shop assistant is standing in front of me, smiling dubiously. Her gaze slithers down me until it reaches my hands, still enfolded in the fabric of the evening dress.

‘Oh, no, no thank you, no.’

‘What is it you are looking for...?’

‘Shirts! Black ones!’ I blurt out, far too loud.

‘This is the womenswear department. Menswear is upstairs – shirts and suits. Second floor. Turn left as soon as you get up there.’

I race up the escalator. The song has finished and I’m in a daze. That scene, the one I didn’t even know about, I didn’t know she, Doris, was even there in my head. I’ve got her surname, but no image of her. That’s what I thought at least, and suddenly now I do. But only her back, not her face. It must have come from the very back of my mind, the place where usually only headaches knot and tighten.

I run through the years, but can't place the time and the scene doesn't fit in anywhere. My parents in the kitchen, after one of Suat's performances sometime probably, a couple, in love, together. The more I concentrate on it, on the skin of Doris' back, her black evening dress, the feeble light and the murmur of the pop song, the softer the image becomes. I can't believe this scene, that it could even exist, or that it could even have been Doris. Doris and Suat, better to name each one alone than together. Not parents – that word binds two people together as if they were one.

In the changing room I button up the black shirt, tug it so it sits right and look at myself in the mirror. I can't say it looks elegant. It doesn't sit right on my hips and the sleeves are a bit tight. I don't even know any more if I need a bigger or a smaller size. I'll just buy it now.

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Luise has asked if I want to watch a film with her – she's got one downloaded. I hadn't heard of it, but she said it was something special. After the first seventy minutes have gone by I would probably say it's one of those movies that try to challenge your preconceptions of what film is, in that nothing has actually happened yet. We've all seen them: every time a new character appears you think, oh, this guy's important, and then they never show up again. I don't enjoy films like this – they're just not entertaining. I'd rather watch a proper story, one with some drama and a bit of tension, and, to be honest, I like kitschy old comedies, cheap jokes and predictable love stories. The only exciting thing about this film is that I'm watching it with Luise. I'm already thinking about taking out my contact lenses. I'd have no trouble seeing Luise, we're sitting that close on her bed. Unlike me, she's paying close attention to the non-existent plot. Every now and then she laughs.

'Do you want another beer, Lu?'

Luise nods. When I come back with two bottles and hold one out for her she tears her eyes from the screen for a moment to look me straight in the eye when we clink the bottles. The longer the film goes on, the closer our bodies press against each other. The outsides of our thighs are touching, our shoulders and forearms, too. I wouldn't complain if there was a whole lot more than that. And yes, I know full well Luise is my flatmate and that I'm fascinated by her, I'm attracted to her, confused by her, and, to put it bluntly, I can't ignore what I feel for her, and anything like this is an absolute no-no in a flat share. I moved in two months ago, and what convinced me that this flat share was right was Luise, make no mistake.

When I came to look around it was the usual deal: sit in the kitchen, cafeti re of coffee on the table, window open and taking turns to say a bit about ourselves, while everyone else nods and says it's cool, when really they just find it a bit uncomfortable.

I talked a lot but didn't say much about myself. Andy cracked some bad jokes and asked the usual questions (What's with your name? It's cool – where did you get it from? You play cello? Sick – how much practice do you do? Cool. So, like, what are your other hobbies?) Chrissie wasn't there (though that paints a pretty fair picture of her anyway – she works a lot

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and if she's not at work, she's off with her boyfriend). And then there was Luise. She scrutinised me while she rolled cigarettes, hardly saying anything (it was only when we got onto films, that set her off). When we'd finished and were standing at the door, she grinned a little and said, 'So, ok. See you soon? I mean, how I see it, everything's ok.'

The closing credits roll and the room grows darker with them. This is the classic moment when you shuffle a little closer together, put your arm round her shoulders, hold her hand, and, if things are going well, maybe a snog. But I can't imagine Luise liking that – Luise, who retches at anything clichéd. Without warning she snaps her laptop shut and suddenly it's completely dark.

'Did you want to watch the credits right to the end?' her voice asks out of the darkness.

'Nah,' I say, sitting up.

There's no sound, no movement. I'm waiting for her to flick on the light, but nothing's happening. I'm getting stressed.

'Lu?'

'Yeah.'

'What's up with the light?'

Now Luise stirs, and suddenly her hands are there, stroking up over my forearms until they rest on my shoulders. I'm so confused I can't even move. Then her mouth touches my face and her tongue too, on my eyes, my chin, my lips. My breathing is ragged, I can hardly feel the gap between each heartbeat. Luise pushes me up against the wardrobe at the top of her bed.

I don't dare touch her. I don't know where to start on her warm, firm body, a body that's everywhere, that I'm touching in so many places at once but can't see at all.

Then she breaks away, takes her mouth away, her hands, gets out of bed, goes a few steps and turns the light on. I press my eyes shut, and when I can see again there is Luise, standing at the door, looking at me.

'That film was all right,' she says, and disappears into the bathroom.

The shower heads gag and splutter at first, then the pipes rattle and at last the water shoots out – cool, warmer, hot. We stand in the clouds of steam in the home showers, as naked and loud as ever. Banter hammers around the tiled shower room.

A naked Dino stands in front of me, pulling dramatic faces while playing an invisible cello, wailing out the tune to 'My Heart Will Go On'. I grin. Someone kicks a bottle of 3-in-1 shower gel between Dino's legs and I trap it under my foot. The spray from the showers fogs us while foam and sweat puddle over the drains.

Off the pitch and out of the showers the din levels out. My ringtone jingles through the changing room and I rummage for my phone. It's my aunt Elide. I let it go to voicemail and notice that she's rung three times while we were out training.

'Right lads, who's up for a döner? Millennium Star?' Wilma tosses his question out into the room.

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Outside I fall back a few metres behind the kebab squad and call my aunt back. She picks up straight away. ‘*Canım*, it’s you at last.’ Sweetie, she’s always called me that. ‘Osman, can you hear me? You have to come.’

It’s not until Ali passes my döner over the counter (a bit of hot, no salad) that I realise I won’t be able to stomach it. Dino and Wilma are already halfway through their döners by the time I’ve joined them at their table and started to think what I’m going to do. First, I grab a Coke.

‘Man, anything sick, they just grind it down. In two years Ali will be broke, you get me? They should tax dumps like that.’ Wilma is pointing at the new cafe which has opened up opposite Millennium Star. ‘The owners of them places where it’s all matcha, coconut water, smoothies, detox tea and vegan chia cupcakes on the menu and all the customers got to sit on is pallets, you know? Walls just bare bricks and you drink your kiwi and celery juice out of a jam jar? Places like that, let them pony up, man.’

Naked lightbulbs dangle in the window opposite where the waitress is just wiping today’s ‘Detox Thursday’ advertisement off the window. Dino smacks his lips and swallows. ‘This, man, is an honest kebab. It doesn’t pretend to be nothing more than an honest kebab.’

‘That’s it, man. It’s not going to poison you, and it ain’t going to heal you, either. It’s just honest with you, and honesty should be rewarded, you get me? That’s why Ali gets the subsidies from that gentrification tax – so he can pay the rent the man just doubled on him.’

‘Os, why are you looking like that döner’s about to bite you?’

‘Fam, I don’t think it’s vegan.’

Wilma and Dino chuckle. Their kebabs have been reduced to nothing more than a strip of bread in a scrap of greaseproof paper.

I add a proper shake of salt to mine and take a few bites, but my aunt only needed a few words to take my appetite away completely.

To do this in the presence of Millennium Ali’s handiwork is a catastrophe. ‘Boys, sorry, I’m done.’

Wilma and Dino stare. ‘What, already?’

‘Yeah, don’t know what’s up, but I’m not feeling it.’

Dino takes over the operation and munches his way through the kebab in no time. ‘It’s different to mine.’

‘No salad.’

‘If there’s no salad it just isn’t cool, bro. This is well salty, too.’

Wilma wipes his mouth. ‘Anyway, what we were just talking about. You could...’

‘Boys, I’m gonna do one. I’ll see you...’

Dino raises his hand. ‘Engels, man, what’s going on with the girl from your band, is she...?’

‘Dino, I have no idea...’

‘So I can proper ask her out for a kebab, or does she like...’ Dino points at the cafe opposite, ‘drink from the other tap?’

I give him a tired grin and pull the door open. ‘I’ll ask. Enjoy your meal.’

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A few hundred metres later I'm disappearing into the underground station. The escalator carries me down the tiled tunnel, then I stand still until the train shoots into the station. Even though I'm hurrying, the doors almost slam shut in my face – every movement forwards is an effort.

My room is dark, there's only the sickly half-light that comes from laptop screens at night. The bus company's website soaks the room a foul shade of green as I try to book the only affordable ticket from Hamburg to Essen at an ungodly hour. The site loads and a bright green logo pops up: thank you, your booking is confirmed. A wave of nausea spreads through me and there's every reason for it: the light, the bus journey at 6.30 in the morning, and my father.

I'd said yes. Yes, Auntie, I'm coming. I'll come the day after tomorrow.