

Futures

Variations on Heisenberg's Third Concerto

A moving piece of music. By Eleanor R. Wood

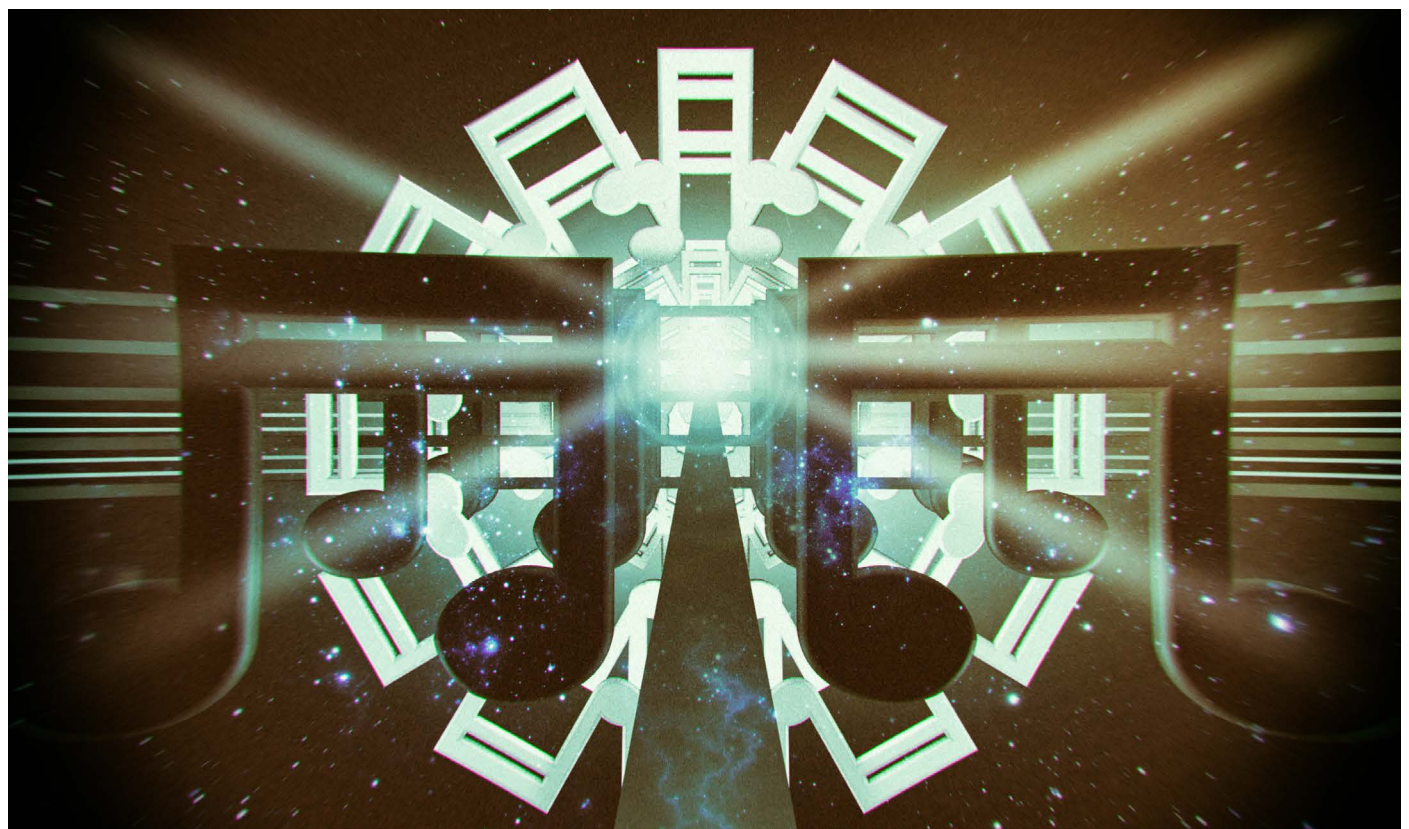


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Lift my baton. The orchestra is poised, ready, hands on instruments, eyes on me. My soloist sits at the Steinway to my left. Our anticipation is a singular thing; the thrumming awareness that we're about to play something no one, not even ourselves, has heard before. This is both the joy and the fear of Heisenberg's Third Concerto. It is never the same twice.

Raj gave it to me on his triumphant return. He was the first scientist to travel to a parallel universe, and his greatest joy was bringing back a souvenir for his wife.

"You'll never believe this, Mira," he said, his face alight with excitement. "You know Heisenberg was a physicist who dabbled in music?" I nodded, smiling at his delight.

"In that universe, it was the other way

around. There, he was a musician who dabbled in science – a composer! He wrote astounding pieces, and I brought one back for you ... the score to his third piano concerto." He handed me the sheet music with the grin I so loved.

I sensed the heart of his enthusiasm – his hero could now be mine, too. The serendipity was beautiful. And so was the piece: the one I've come to think of as the First Variation. I only wish we'd recorded it. But how were we to know it would never sound that way again?

The second time, the orchestra was so surprised that we all stopped at the end of the third bar.

"Did someone swap the music?" I asked, but our scores still read 'Heisenberg's Third Piano Concerto'. It was only then I thought it strange

that there was no mention of key in its title.

We carried on playing, and to our astonishment, an entirely new concerto came to life. No one stumbled, no one missed a beat or fluffed a note. It was as if we knew it as intimately as a piece we'd practised for weeks. But none of us had heard it before. The orchestra said their fingers instantly had the muscle memory, their eyes scanning notes that were at once new and familiar.

Each time we played it, the same thing occurred. Sometimes the changes were subtle; sometimes there was barely any similarity at all. One day it was in wistful C minor, the next soaring in E flat major. Sometimes the key changes had no relation to each other. Sometimes the time signature was simple, sometimes compound, the tempo *allegro* or *andante* or *presto*. Sometimes it was none of

Futures

those things. Millions of potential variations surrounded us as we sat to play, only converging on one when I signalled the downbeat and the performance began.

If only I'd known what it meant. If only I'd known that the music wasn't the only singularity that converged as we played.

"I'm going back, love," Raj said to me over dinner one evening. "There's so much more to learn about the other universe, and now we've perfected the technology, it's even safer than the first trip."

I moved food around on my plate, refusing to admit my worries. Much as I hated him travelling into the unknown, Raj could no more stop exploring than I could stop conducting. Each of our careers was our way to understand the world.

He noticed my concern anyway, and took my hand. "I'll bring you back a new Heisenberg piece."

I squeezed his fingers. "That would be lovely."

But my worst fears came true. He didn't return. Who knows what universe they even sent him to. The concerto changed everything, but his colleagues didn't make the connection until Raj had been missing for weeks. I kept performing, because I had to. Because the worry for my husband would have driven me mad without my music.

And then someone in the lab noticed that the universes were shifting, seemingly at random. It was only when some of Raj's colleagues attended a couple of our performances that they realized why. We tested it together, proving the hypothesis: somehow, a new universe emerged every time we performed the concerto. As the music manifested anew, so did the parallel universe the scientists were connecting to. Infinite variations of each.

It had been my fault. We performed the Heisenberg two days after Raj left, and

unknowingly stranded him. We've performed it countless times since.

I did this to him. I don't know how to live with that.

I have to keep changing orchestras and soloists. I can't blame them; they want to play other pieces. I'm the only one still obsessed with the Heisenberg. I have to be. I have to keep performing it, hoping against all conceivable odds that we'll converge again on the concerto that links back to Raj. The one that will bring my husband home.

I strike the downbeat, and a new variation rises up around me. I pin my hopes on infinity, and we play.

Eleanor R. Wood's stories have appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Deep Magic*, *Daily Science Fiction* and *Galaxy's Edge*, among other places. She writes and eats liquorice in southwest England.