

A Note on Concierto de Aranjuez
by Jim McCurry

Perhaps the finest twenty minutes of music ever recorded on Creed Taylor's CTI label, the Jim Hall date (April 1975) featuring Paul Desmond, Chet Baker, Sir Roland Hanna, Ron Carter, and Steve Gadd on the *Concierto de Aranjuez* is the subject of these timorous and tentative ruminations, nearly twenty-seven years later. I don't know how many times I have enjoyed the recording. I only know that I shall never tire of doing so.

It is my favorite performance by Desmond, by Baker, and by Hall. And only the fact that I am fairly well acquainted with the range of their recordings, and not so much so with that of Hanna, Carter, and Gadd, prevents me from including these last three in that same general personal assessment.

It is also flawless, or nearly so. Perhaps it is only Desmond that seems to me to falter on a note or two, and yet—not long before he was to leave us, all too soon—Desmond was able to deliver one of the most moving and impeccable solos of his career. Leonard Feather, on the original liner notes, said rightly of Baker's solo, following Desmond's, that it was "one of the most definitive statements of his melodic direction" during his nearly twenty-five year recording career. Both men are tragic, in some sense. But I prefer to leave the reader to his or her own reflections about them. I will only mention, for now, the beauty and sadness that haunts my impressions of their passing lives and legacy.

Flawlessness? Perfection? Tragedy, sadness, beauty? I am somewhat nonplussed, for this complex emotion that struggles to find words now seems quite effortlessly expressed in the actual recording itself. I want to speak of duende, but somehow I feel I should leave that to my betters. Is not life and our attempts to sort out its comedy, its tragedy, its failures and triumphs of love, its moments of apotheosis and degradation, the very issue of Joaquin Rodrigo's composition? I do not know if he would have wept to hear what these six musicians did in the Rudy Van Gelder Studios in spring 1975, or not. I do know that Handy wept at Louis Armstrong's classic recording session, saying that he had never heard his music performed so. And I like to imagine the shade of Joaquin Rodrigo likewise murmuring, *That's it! That what I wanted to say.*

There is in me, or in us all, perhaps, this tension of contradictions that the composition, particularly in this recorded version, gives voice to. You love someone who on occasions provokes your cruelty—or, at best, your bitter and mute frustration. You almost die when she is not present, and yet there are times—let's face it—when she drives you up the wall. May the furies strike me dead and dumb, if they like, for even attempting to say this. But I think the *Concierto* **is** the duende.

Plato's dream of heaven? Or the gypsy spirit that is more than human and yet depends on us, and comes through us, and through all of this mysterious experience of life? Not just in our dream of reason, through the high temptation, the Cartesian pride and falseness—but in every way and in all ways, animal and human.

Are we apes or angels?

The *Concierto* eschews that false dilemma. It murmurs to us, *Yes, yes*, as we sit with the dying, as we dream of palms and ocean breezes and the beloved, as we go on our honeymoon, as we take our place in the cortege, as we march to the burial ground.

My eighty-two year old mother clings to the hand of the doctor's wife, who was before only a voice to her on the telephone, as we prepare to exit the Sunday morning café. The snow lies in

patches. It is cold, windy, but the sun is shining brightly. All she wishes for now is that I will be less crabby, and take her to the dollar store for vinegar to clean the kitchen linoleum, and perhaps some wax for later on. I do not know what news of impending war, or what conflict of voices will reign on the television. I have come on to school, to my office, to sit and type these overdue liner notes. As if my notes were needed. As if they could make up (even were they successful) for the tragic and pathetic waste, for the general and particular madness in our lives, as the war drums beat on, inexorably.

I love my friends, the women I have loved and lost, the departed elderly ones, all the old ones that I recall from the early Forties on, yes, and the gone students, and the dead animals, too, all of them, both 'road kill' and pets. And I fondly imagine, at times, that I am loved--have been loved-- by them, in return.

And then, as I listen once again to the *Concierto* album, as Jim, and Paul, and Chet, and Roland, and Ron, and Steve do their personal and collective bit, their priceless and impeccable best, to cohere--I fondly imagine, yet again, that the martyrdom of the innocents shall somehow prove redemptive, that, in the fullness of time, all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well.

And my eyes are too dry to weep.