

# ON A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT IN “THE SKATERS” BY JOHN ASHBERY


For I am condemned to drum my fingers  
On the closed lid of this piano, this tedious planet, earth  
As it winks to you through the aspiring, growing distances,  
A last spark before the night.

From “The Skaters,” Part II

A ARTE ALEGRE  
#22

Partilhe:

[Facebook](#), [X](#).

Leia depois:  Kindle

Listening to John Ashbery read his poem, “The Skaters,” in the outtakes to *USA: Poetry*, this stanza is particularly striking. This might be because the recording starts at a few early stanzas of Part II of the poem.<sup>[1]</sup> The strangeness of the poem beginning in this way calls great attention to the image of the piano that otherwise would not necessarily stand out in an extraordinary fashion among all the other images in the poem.

This passage from Part II of “The Skaters” (1963–64, published 1966) focuses the reader’s attention on a sound, as well as on a potentiality. The reader can imagine the poet in this image standing next to a piano, a grand piano or an upright piano. The “lid” does not necessarily suggest one or the other. There are references to music in other parts of the poem, so this piano is not an anomaly or particularly unusual; there is a “stupid song” (Part III); “tuba notes” and a lot of other musical instruments (Part I); the haunting lines: “the

human mind / cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme / of some sodden 'dump' or lament" (Part I); and the weight of the images or visions in the poem causes the floor to sag, "as under the weight of a piano" (Part I). These suggestions of music are noisy, dangerous, and heavy on the mind. It is also frightening to think we can only hold a two-note theme in our memory—and a theme that is, moreover, so sad.

However, the closed piano in Part II cited above suggests another kind of image and use of a musical instrument that is counterintuitive to its everyday and/or concert purpose. The stanza does not appear to contribute to an elaborate image or vision, or to the *voyage* that dominates much of Part II. It is almost like the poet coming to himself and reflecting on the business he is doing of remembering, and holding images in his mind, writing them down or just thinking about them. It seems that he may actually be doing the thing that he describes: drumming on the lid of a piano. This is because this description follows one of the few stanzas when Ashbery is explaining, to a certain extent, what the poem is all about. Each part of "The Skaters" is a little bit different, but Part II (and this section of Part II) is on the heavens:

Old heavens,  
you lying there above the old, but not ruined, fort,  
can you hear, there, what I am saying?

For it is you I am parodying

And a little later, as the poet is on an imagined voyage along a coast, Ashbery writes:

My perennial voyage, into new memories, new  
hope and flowers  
the way the coasts glide past you. I shall never  
forget this moment

Because it consists of purest ecstasy. I am happier  
now than I ever dared believe  
anyone could be. And we finger down the dog-  
eared coasts

[ ... ]

it is all passing! It is past! No, I am here,  
Below the coasts, and even the heavens roar their  
assent

Depictions of the heavens, the absolute, the unknown, destiny, life and death that appear across the poem take the reader through these assertions and interrogations. Nevertheless, the moment at the piano signals a pause before the next image, before the voyage of Part II even truly begins. The heavens, as the world, depicted in this sequence, seems to be more about possibility than judgement. It suggests a knowledge that the heavens might hold of predestination, or at least stand as a reminder that the final destination is death ("a last spark before the night"). But before all this, there is life to be lived and explored, and a present that is to be lived and not seen as past before it is completely apprehended.

When the poet drums his fingers on the lid of a piano, the poet is not using the piano as it is supposed to be used. Whether an upright piano or grand piano, the sound that comes from drumming or knocking on a piano lid is very hollow but sonorous. It is a distant sound from within the mechanism, which suggests possibility. Music can come into existence if the lid is open. However, the closed lid gives the impression that it's not that the music cannot come into existence, but that it is the poet who is unable to bring it into existence. (Or maybe it is about someone who is just practicing and doesn't want the world to hear it.)

A grand piano has a more majestic appearance than an upright piano for this exercise; the instrument is cumbersome in either form, nevertheless, and is not really anything except if viewed aesthetically (like a musical instrument in a museum exhibition). Its purpose is not worn on its sleeve like a chair, which is even if no one is sitting on it. A musical instrument requires an agent; without one, it is a colossal dead weight. There are a series of questions one can make about this in the context of the poem, for example: is the piano a work of art or is the piano a vehicle? If it is a vehicle, can we look at it like a car that takes us to some place? Or is the piano more like a pencil, which allows us to write? Whether we engage with the instrument or not (by drumming on it, for example), these kinds of questions can

occur to us when we look at a musical instrument on a stage or consider one in a poem.

And what about the "lid"? Pianos usually have what might look like two "lids," but one is only properly called a "lid." There's the "fallboard," which is a lid-like thing that cups over the keys to keep dust (and the unmusical) from getting in. The true *lid* of the piano is over the strings. When I read the passage in Ashbery's poem, the sound that comes to my mind is that which is heard when you tap loudly on the lid of a grand piano: a gentle ringing sound emerges from that door which has closed the part of the instrument that really gives life to music; when opened, it reveals the majesty of the instrument and its glory as a feat of engineering. It is that the poet might not have the courage to open the lid, for the music to resound. It might be that the poet simply does not know how to play. To drum on the piano lid wakes up the ligaments which *can* make music. If the piano is fully opened, someone even can go there and make a heck of a noise, too, with rolling their fists over the sharps and flats.

But being able to play the instrument with skill does not seem to be the problem in the stanza; it is that the poet is "condemned" to drumming his fingers on the lid. There is no possibility for opening the piano. This might be illustrative of how the poem itself revolves around extended visions or images, interspersed with smaller ones, all which describe in some way the themes of life and death, memory and living. One could say that the significance of the closed piano is that the poet will never be able to hear music or make music until he is dead (that the world does not offer the possibility for complete fulfillment until death). The poet is insouciant before his condemnation, making time beside the piano. However, it can also be read that the poet has not yet reached the world, has not yet lassoed the world, in his images; the whole enterprise of the poem still needs to fully unfold. To take a present moment and force it into the past for the purpose of describing it as memory is nearly impossible, as the "heavens roar their assent" that the present is here and should be regarded as such. The feeling should not be folded up and put away in the place of memory in an effort to make sure it can be remembered. It is almost like experiencing joy versus experiencing joy with an adjoining effort to put it to memory. Unlike Orpheus who successfully plays for the

animals, Ashbery captures that moment before potentiality of the mind becomes actuality, and where the present is turned into memory (so it might be written about in the form of instruments and images).

[1] "John Ashbery, from USA: Poetry, NET Outtakes Series: March 6, 1966 – The Poetry Center." Posted August 23, 2024 by Poetry Center Archive Goes Live! YouTube, 8 min., 55 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6VAaG6Fa1E>.

INFO    INSTRUÇÕES/INSTRUCTIONS    CONVERSA DE MESA    SÉRIES  
CONVERSAS DAS SETE PARTIDAS    SEPARATAS    PODCASTS    EXTRAS  
WFL

A **FORMA DE VIDA** É A REVISTA DO PROGRAMA EM  
TEORIA DA LITERATURA DA FACULDADE DE  
LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA.  
TEM ARBITRAGEM INDEPENDENTE E ACEITA  
PROPOSTAS DE ARTIGOS.

Acompanhe ainda as iniciativas da Rede de Filosofia e Literatura.

Para nos contactar, use este endereço.

ISSN 2183-1343