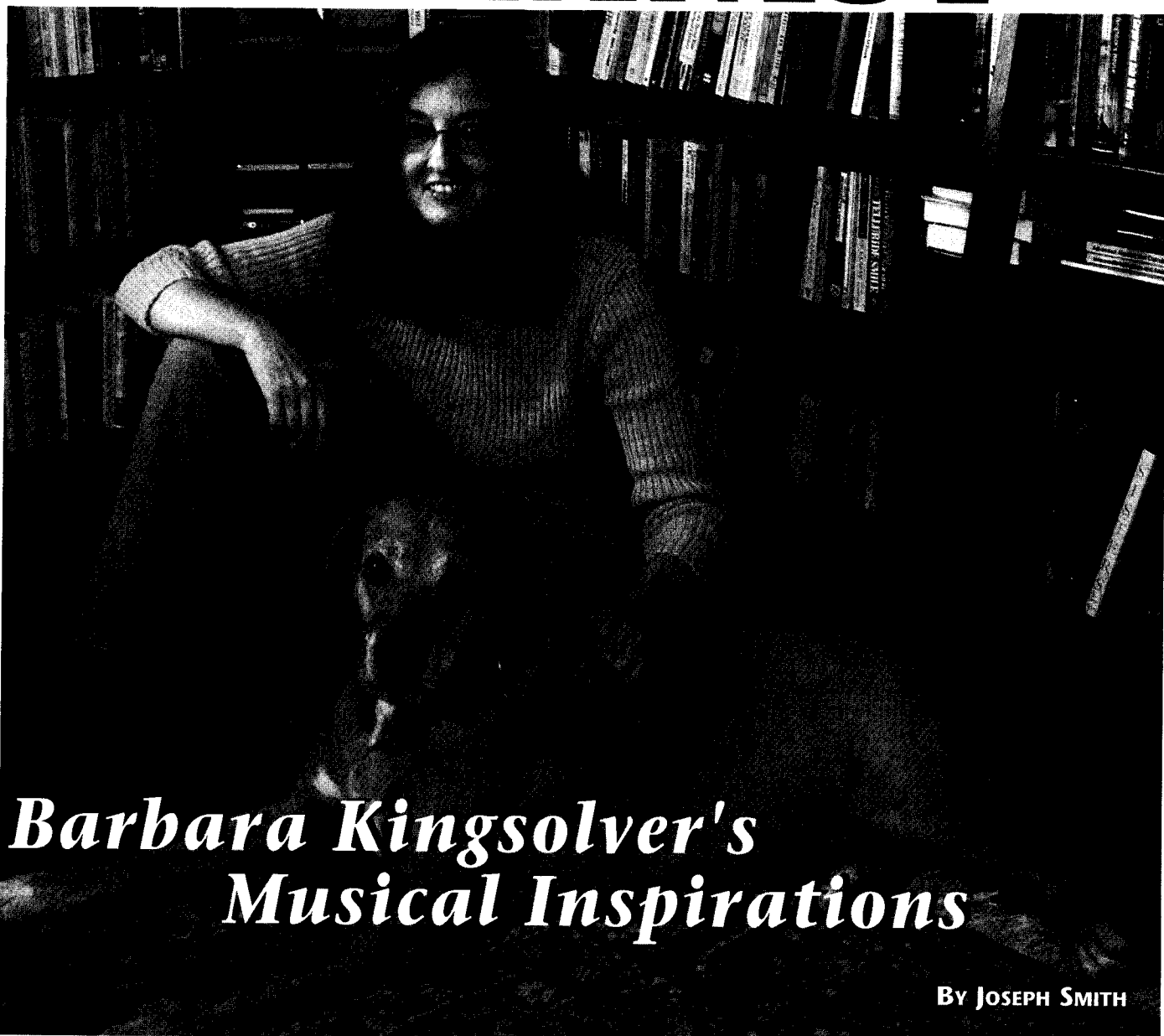


the WRITERLY PIANIST



Barbara Kingsolver's Musical Inspirations

By JOSEPH SMITH

Photo by Steven Hopp

BARBARA KINGSOLVER, one of the most distinguished of contemporary American authors, has written in all forms, but her novels are particularly beloved—they are deeply serious, yet thoroughly readable and ingratiating. It may surprise some readers to learn that Barbara Kingsolver is an avid pianist. Although she seldom gives interviews, she was intrigued with the idea of discussing her musical life with *Piano Today*. Barbara (as she insisted I call her) is utterly informal. Her voice

on the phone reminded me of her fictional character Taylor (in *The Bean Trees*)—youthful, spunky, and unreserved. Knowing her from her books, I had the impression not of conducting an interview with a stranger, but of chatting with a friend.

JS: How did you come to study classical piano in the first place? I know you grew up in a very rural part of Kentucky.

BK: I *begged* for lessons at the age of six. We had a

piano in the house—my mother played a little. I started with a lady in my little town, someone just about able to tell me what common time was, and how to put my thumb on middle C. Somehow, though, I picked up enough to play everything I could get my hands on. But I was really lucky—when I was in sixth grade... But I'm telling you a story—you don't want to hear a story...

JS: Actually, I'm pretty sure I do.

BK: Well we had a substitute music teacher. I don't know how a musician like her found herself in this little town teaching folk singing and square dancing to schoolchildren who didn't want to be there, but there she was. She looked at me one day and asked if I played piano. I have no idea how she knew. So, after school, I played for her. She clapped her hands over her ears, and exclaimed, "You're almost ruined, but I think I'm in time to rescue you!" I didn't know whether to be mortified or flattered. She worked with me every day after school—it was my first real instruction. We worked for just a couple of months. After she left, my mother understood how important piano was to me, so she started driving me to Lexington for real lessons.

JS: And later?

BK: In high school the piano was the thing that saved me from myself! We all need something to get us through adolescence, and fortunately, my drug was the piano. I entered piano competitions and concerto contests. It gave me something to hang onto—something that let me look beyond high school. I was actually surprised to win a music scholarship to DePauw University.

JS: I know from the bio on your books that you play jazz now—did you always play jazz?

BK: I flirted with jazz off and on, but it didn't really happen to me until I *married* it. My husband Steven is a gifted and devoted jazz guitarist. I had to rise to the challenge to develop my jazz skills to the point where we could play together. It's really funny—we play together now, but we bring exactly opposite perspectives. Steven is a real jazz musician—a pure improvisation guy. He was self-taught and has learned by listening, whereas I have always tried to analyze and codify and organize things. Whenever we happen to hit a fantastic lick together, I always want to yell, "Stop! Stop so I can write this down!" In fact, as a jazz pianist, I'm sure I will never really recover from my classical training. When I play for myself, though, I mostly play classical music.

JS: Who are your favorites to play?

BK: I'm especially drawn to the post-romantics—I keep coming back to Debussy, Ravel, and Bartok. And, of course, Chopin. I do remember once going through a Scarlatti binge.

JS: How much time do you find to practice?

BK: Oh, maybe on the average, three to five hours a week these days, because I'm raising my two kids, and I do have this *job*...

JS: Oh, please go on writing your books.

BK: I know for sure that when my kids are grown, the one thing that will change in my life is that I will spend more time with my piano. I have fantasies of finally playing Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque* and Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin*.

JS: When you're playing music, do you feel that the kind of creativity is in any way analogous to writing? Or does it feel like something completely different?

BK [long pause]: Well, it's interesting—it's opposite in some ways, and it's similar in some ways. I can tell you why I play music—why it's something I need for my mental health. Something I recognize about myself is that I have an overdose of words in my head. I hear this ongoing voice (I suppose it's mine!) making endless commentary on everything I see, setting out lines of reasoning, making claims, finding ways to describe things. Music is the *only* thing that completely shuts it off.

JS: Yes, it is a way to think *without words*, isn't it?

BK: When I'm concentrating on music, the verbal part of my brain shuts down. (In fact, I was surprised to discover that when I'm playing jazz or rock, I can't play and sing at the same time.) But to get back to your question, I also recognize that music and writing are two different, almost opposite impulses that are probably generated by the *same* creative drive. I do hear

music as narrative, and I think constantly about the musicality of my writing. I read passages aloud after I've written them so that I can attend to meter and pitch, and the subtleties of how my words will strike the ear.

JS: In prose as well as poetry?

BK: Absolutely—not just poetry, but essays and fiction. I do it with dialogue, descriptive passages, everything. And even though I know that my readers may not be reading my books aloud, the *sound* of the prose is important to me.

JS: Your readers will still be hearing the words in their mind's ear.

BK: Unless they are speed-reading—but I certainly hope they're not!

JS: I notice that wordplay figures prominently in your books. Several of your characters are prone to malapropisms, and Adah in *The Poisonwood Bible* is obsessed with palindromes. Since wordplay uses language as sound and pattern, do you think there is an association with music?

BK: Intuitively, I think there is. I do know that I tend to be a very analytical writer in the same way I'm an analytical musician. When I'm studying a piece of music, I always break it down—I note the various themes, the chord structure, the variations, the repetitions. I know that the part of my brain that created Adah, who expresses herself in complex palindromes, is the same part of my brain that loves musical inversions... And just as one

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*I think constantly about
the musicality of my
writing.*

and fermata, and brings discontinuous music (emphasizing rests) to the fore. The Variation movement "Banana" is really one large arc in hand-body placement: The tune's first two full statements move from highest treble gradually crossing over the body's center point; the third statement is totally in the bass; then there is a final return to traditional placement. Its gentle syncopations (continuing the eighth-note flow from the beginning to the close) introduce 5/8 meter, along with the concept of visually orienting to the eighth-note (not the quarter-note) as the principal symbol for pulse.

Binary-form "Mandarin Orange" is a melody study in legato that proceeds primarily in three-bar phrases, and is built entirely upon the pentatone. The student must learn the piece twice—once on all black keys, and again on all white keys. "Dessert," the closing Toccata, is

brilliant in attitude with sudden dramatic shifts of patterns up or down an octave. It covers most of the piano's keyboard, requires digital dexterity plus good control of pedalling and dynamics, and introduces *una corda* and *tre corde*, *ritardando* and a closing *accelerando*.

"Banana" had an unusual genesis. I woke up one morning with its "bopping" third in my head, started whistling it out loud with my morning fruit and cereal, then jumped up from the table to write it down. It was such a cheerful tune, and it hid within its syncopations the rhythm for the word "banana." The Caribbean connotation was inevitable. Right away, my college-age son Michael popped into the studio to tell me how much he liked that melody, and to ask me to play the music for him two or three times in a row. (A rare occurrence!)

Once Michael chimed in, the entire suite came together in a flash:

Music about *food*—everyone eats lunch—in *five* highly-characterized movements, each one dedicated to my son, niece and nephews (all of whom studied piano when young); with an articulated musical *structure* for the whole to provide the teacher with specific performance and analytic goals for every movement.

In My Lunchbox finally turned out to be a most positive composing adventure. Working on it allowed me to marry quite specific formal goals (with a few constraints on technique) to a series of concrete musical inspirations that proved engaging and stimulating throughout the creative process. And Michael's repeat requests over this last year to hear all five movements again and again let me know how well *Lunchbox* meets its intended mark. —Judith Lang Zaimont

See "The Banana Song" on the following pages.

Kingsolver *continued*

can appreciate the second movement of the Berg Chamber Concerto without even knowing that it is a palindrome, I hope that Adah's wordplay can be appreciated as expressing her personality, even by a reader with no interest in palindromes.

JS: I hate to rush on to the next question, but I know that I have limited time with you...

BK: Oh, don't worry—I'm having a good time!

JS: As well as a writer and musician, you have been a scientist. What an unusual combination.

BK: Well, it turns out that linguistics, science, and music use the same part of the brain, so maybe it isn't so strange as it seems. When I was in graduate school in science, I felt I had to keep my activities in both poetry and music a secret—I was afraid it would make me seem less serious. But among adult scientists, of course, there is much more tolerance for diverse interests. Einstein wasn't the only physicist to play music!

JS: Some authors write their interest in music into their fiction—most

notably Proust. The only musician I have encountered in your novels is Jax in *Pigs in Heaven*, and he is a rock musician. I find it interesting that classical music is an important part of your life, but it never figures in your work.

BK: Well, it has not been a conscious choice—I never realized it until you pointed it out! I think it is probably an artifact of my literary terrain. I tend to write about working class characters, people who wouldn't necessarily have been exposed to classical music...

JS: Well, Carson McCullers created an uneducated girl who becomes obsessed with Mozart.

BK: What an unusual, offbeat character! But McCullers certainly brings it off, doesn't she! Well, I think it may also be symptomatic of my divided brain, as we discussed before—music is the anti-writing, and writing is the anti-music. It may be that it just doesn't cross over.

JS: Well, Barbara, thank you for taking the time to talk with me—time you could have been practicing! I'm sure that our readers will enjoy hearing how important playing music is in your life.

BK: It saddens me to think that so many people think of music as something that has to be produced by other people—professionals. I've always thought of music as something I can do myself. I guess I'm just lucky in growing up hearing music come from people more than from radios. In my home, everybody played music, and family jams were a normal part of my childhood, and they remain a part of my family life now.

My kids, my friends play instruments, and social events tend to turn musical. My husband Steven and I occasionally perform benefits for some organization we want to support, and I played with the Rock Bottom Reminders—an all-author rock band.

Part of my motivation for doing this is to show people—especially younger people—that even those who don't approach the polish of the professional can still find music making worthwhile. ■

See this issue's Rare Finds column for an interesting look at musical palindromes.

from Sonata, Hob. 26

MINUET AL ROVESCIO

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
(1732-1809)

1 Menuet al rovescio

5

9

13

17

(etc.)

3

Trio (al rovescio)

21

tr

25

1 2

30

5 4 3
3 1 2

(etc.)

35

40

tr

Menuet da capo